

After the Second Rise

By: Red

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In Hells Jaws and Heaven's Doorstep

All was quiet on a small farm at the edge of a peaceful town in the rolling country lands of Great Britain. The Farmer and his wife had gone to bed hours ago; their small daughter had been tucked in even before that. The farmer was able to sleep peacefully after having checked his holding and finding nothing out of its place. The horses were locked up in their stables, the pig had a fresh trough of leftover vegetables and corn meal, and the dog was asleep on the bed at the farmer's feet. A sheet had gone missing a couple of days ago and it was still missing but the farmer and his wife had decided it would turn up eventually so that problem was now in the dust.

Nothing, (aside from the sheet), was out of the ordinary on this small holding, nothing strange or wondrous ever happened on the farm and the farmer and his wife liked things to be just as they were...normal. They wanted no association with the old Riddle Manor on the other side of their cozy little town, and being somewhat superstitious, they had built their home as far away from that gaunt place as they could please. Thus they enjoyed the peaceful, simplicity that a dull, normal life could offer on their tiny, undisturbed, little farm.

If the farmer had known at all that the lightshow at the Cemetery seven nights ago had anything to do with the missing sheet and very possibly the haystack in the stables as well. He would have probably grabbed his family and run as far away from the farm as his feet could carry him. As it was the Farmer, like all humans, had the innate ability to overlook the more obvious problems. So it was no surprise

to anyone that when the farmer had done his routine check of the grounds he overlooked the unusually bulging haystack in the corner of the stable house. If he had checked the hay stack he might have found the missing sheet wrapped around a frail and very dirty looking boy not yet fifteen buried within the hay and sleeping fretfully.

Thankfully, the Farmer had not even the slightest clue that this child was anywhere near his farm and thus continued to allow the frail boy to rest buried in the hay in the corner of the stables.

So, the strange young man slept deeply, his unruly black hair now matted with hay and his unusually bright green eyes closed tight in peaceful unconsciousness. The boy had been running and hiding for the past seven days. He had had very little sleep in that time and had resorted to stealing food off of windowsills and out of animal troughs. Such was the life of the hunted.

His arm throbbed and a long cut could be seen stretching from his wrist, down his inner fore arm to his elbow. The cut was pussy and inflamed, the boy feared it was badly infected and had only just washed it yesterday night using the hose on the side of the stable. The missing sheet had been his doing and part of said fabric was wrapped tightly around the constantly bleeding cut. It was the cut that was slowing him down. The loss of blood was quickly becoming apparent to the young man and he had buried himself in the hay in order to try to rest and hopefully heal enough so he could continue running, but that had been nearly two days ago, and the boy was sure he was all ready sporting a fever.

Slowly his magnificent green eyes opened as hunger clenched at his empty stomach and the hay stack moved as the boy pushed himself painfully to his knees. His muscles screamed in protest and his bones cracked as he moved them, but the young teen pushed himself up with determination. He winced as he put weight on his bandaged right arm and remembered faintly the "rat" who had given it to him. He growled as his vision swam from the loss of blood and

slowly sat back on his haunches, the hay falling off of him as he sat upright. He held up his injured arm and frowned when he noticed his makeshift bandage would have to be replaced.

The young man grabbed the sheet he had stolen and ripped another long piece off of its slowly diminishing form and set the clean fabric aside as he unwound the bloodied fabric from around his arm. He inspected the wound and decided it looked no worse then the last time he had inspected it. So he stood shakily and stumbled over to a bucket that the farmer had just filled with fresh water for one of the horses and shoved his arm into the cool liquid wincing as he did so. After holding his arm in the water for several numbing minutes he pulled it out and stumbled back to the hay where a strip of fresh sheet was waiting to be tied tightly around his arm again.

After re-wrapping his arm the boy looked around the stable that he had slept in for the past two days, his eyes lighting up as he glimpsed the fresh food in the pig's pen not too far from him. The young man stumbled to the pen digging his hands in the mushy substance that made up the pig's food and shoved the slush ravenously into his mouth. It wasn't the most amazing meal ever created but the boy was happy to have something to eat. Going nearly a week without any real sustaining amounts of food had taught the kid to take what little he could wherever he could get it.

After eating his fill he sat back satisfied that his stomach had consumed a relatively decent amount of food. He shuffled back to the hay stack and plopped down upon its scratchy surface thinking. His unruly hair fell from his face to reveal a most unusual scar situated in the middle of his forehead. The scar was in the shape of a bolt of lightning and the damned throbbing thing was responsible for shaping his life.

If it weren't for that scar...he thought that then perhaps, his parents would be alive and all of the things he had faced thus far in his youthful life would not have happened the way they had. Perhaps, if

he had not ever received the scar then he would have grown up a normal...magical...life...

He shook his head violently shoving the "what-if"s and "what-would-have-been"s to the far reaches of his mind. Such thinking had never gotten him anywhere before and the young man with the unusual, life-shattering scar refused to dwell on such useless, depressing thoughts. He was in a bad enough situation as it was. He didn't need to allow his despair to pull him down if he ever wanted to survive long enough to see his friends again. If he wanted to see if Cedric had survived the portkey transfer...The boy mused that he wasn't even sure if the Avada Kedavra curse had actually hit Cedric before he was spirited away by the portkey.

It had been a quick, spare of the moment action that had led the young man to shove the trophy into his fellow schoolmate's hand the minute he had seen his parents traitor, Peter Pettigrew, standing in that god-forsaken cemetery. The portkey the boy had shoved into his companion's hands had activated at the same time as the sickly green curse was fired. Thus the green-eyed boy had absolutely no idea whether or not his former companion had actually survived.

Still, the horrors he had faced since then had not allowed him to dwell on that moment due to the fact that he had constantly been running and fighting for his own survival. This stable had been the first place in a week that had allowed the boy to relax and think about the tournament and all that had occurred afterward. This town, he had found, was crawling with the enemy. Everywhere he had hidden, everywhere he had gone had brought him right back into the villainous clutches of the cloaked men and women that called themselves "Death Eaters". They were the servants of the newly risen Dark lord known to the world as Lord Voldemort and the young man fleeing from their clutches? Harry Potter, the bane, and unwilling helper to the dark lord's existence.

The very cut on his arm was proof of the Dark lord's second rise into

life: "The blood of the enemy unwillingly given". Harry's green eyes scrutinized the bandage and once again resisted the urge to simply cut off his arm in pure disgust at what the cut now represented to him. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back ignoring the dull throb coming from his arm and from the strange scar on his forehead. One more day of rest, Harry mentally decided, and then he resolved to try to find out where he was and how he was going to get back to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in one piece.

He allowed himself to doze off silently his body shutting down as a deeper sleep began to take hold.

In what felt like minutes the condemned child awoke. He dimly wondered what time it was, but knowing he had no working watch with him simply decided that it was still dark out judging by the lack of light in the stables and the even breathing of the animals. Harry carefully looked around at the dry wooden beams that made up the walls and ceilings. Nothing was out of place, no dust molecules were seen swirling around in the stagnant air. Everything was quiet, and Harry, feeling a sense of déjà vu, even went so far as to risk being cliché and say that the stable he had hidden himself in was too still and too quiet.

Harry slowly pushed himself up onto his elbows, the crunch of straw beneath him sounding too loud in the sudden silence of the room. If everything was so quiet then what was it that had woken him? Harry reached down to his side, his fingers slipping into his baggy pants to finger the dark, thin stick that he had lashed to his thigh four nights ago. It was his only weapon, and his lifeline. The small dark stick was the only reason he had survived his encounter with Voldemort seven nights ago and Harry carefully pulled the object out to hold it in front of him offensively as he shakily stood. The boy winced as his vision swam from loss of blood and cursed such weakness silently. He carefully walked toward the large sliding door of the barn and pressed his ear against it, straining his senses for some hint as to what may lay outside his small haven.

"Bugger the stupid blighter." A harsh voice whispered dimly outside, "Are you sure our Lord is correct about where the brat might be?" Harry could hear the muffled swishing footsteps of the speaker as he/she cautiously approached the barn.

"Yes," a cold elegant voice intoned causing the hair on Harry's neck to stand on end, he knew that voice, "The Dark Lord and the child are linked you fool, he knows what is in the boy's mind and has interpreted his whereabouts to this..." Harry heard a sneer in the simpering voice as he silently made his way to the back of the barn to open the small wooden door that would lead to his escape, "Holding..." The voice trailed off as the footsteps stopped in front of the barn door just as Harry opened the back door with a faint creek.

Harry winced knowing the two death eaters had noticed the sound. The boy flung open the door and fled.

A curse sounded behind him and a spell that Harry had grown very accustomed to within the past week shot out of the silky voiced man lighting up the dark night with a stomach-clenching green glow. Harry didn't need to look back to know that the large image of a green skull with a writhing snake clenched between its teeth was hovering above him in the stars. He had seen the Dark mark twice before this night and had already sketched the image to memory. It was because of the multitude of abrupt popping noises that Harry's feet began moving faster through the high grass. The popping noises meant that other Death Eaters had apparated to the sign of their master's mark.

Harry instinctually dodged to the side as he felt the tingling heat of a violet curse slam into the ground beside him. He didn't pause to rest as he stumbled back to his feet hoping to make it to the distant tree line in front of him. He dodged another curse that was a sort of ill-colored yellow Harry was glad hadn't hit him and got caught by a tripping curse, of all things, for his trouble.

Harry cursed as he fell throwing his hands out in front of him to brace his fall. He landed jarringly on his left hand and cried out as the injured arm buckled under his weight. He tucked in his knees hoping to cushion the injury and heard a resounding snap as his knee landed on something smooth and thin.

Time seemed to still as realization hit him. Not only was he falling with Death Eaters closing in around him, but he had snapped his wand. That sound amongst the chaos of screaming curses and pounding feet echoed in his ear for what felt like an eternity. That wand had been his last line of defense, his last hope of finding a way to make it out of this hellish town alive. Hearing it snap was like hearing his life snap apart before he was even dead.

Time sped back to its original course as a searing pain erupted against his back. Harry arched backward his head flinging back to scream out in surprise at the white heat against his spine. Another ripping pain opened up on his lower back causing Harry to fall forward onto his hands and knees, another scream fighting its way out of his mouth.

The Death Eaters paused forming a dangerous ring around the adolescent relishing in the two deep slashes that had opened the skin on his back smearing his dirty blue t-shirt with dark cherry. The sight of his blood seemed to arouse them, their snickering laughter fueling an anger inside of Harry that he had felt only once before.

Harry reached down and clutched his broken wand, the feathery golden core poking out of the top of the lower half. His fist tightened around the familiar glossy wood and a small flame seemed to light the tip in response to his anger and pain. He shakily stood his eyes hooded under his unruly locks. The Death Eaters Laughed louder knowing the boy's effort was fruitless.

The laughter quickly turned to outrage as Harry pointed his broken wand at one of their own without looking at him and the masked man

burst into flame. Harry began to move. His broken wand pointing at Death Eater's at random and each one he wordlessly pointed to became engulfed in a torrent of flame.

The grass filled field became a brilliant world of light and confusion as Death Eater's left and right ran around screaming as they burned. Harry, the boy with the cursed destiny, had lost himself to his pain and fear. His anger pulsed in his green eyes and fueled the unnatural fire that erupted soundlessly from his wand.

A scarlet spell ripped into his shoulder and a deep gash opened up immobilizing that arm so Harry switched the wand to his other hand and pointed in the general direction of the curse sender. He was rewarded with a scream.

Harry had no delusions about how powerful he was. He was only fourteen years old; he hadn't even taken his O.W.L.'s yet and didn't know half of the spells or dueling techniques that the monsters around him knew. Yet he fired off each powerful curse, (not knowing how he was doing it), with a practiced accuracy. All Harry was aware of was the need to survive, and the need to get out of the clearing. So he was cutting a path through his enemies allowing the wand to do the work for him. The phoenix feather core was burning in its casing giving the wand a powerful golden tip. The core was what was responsible for each towering pillar of fire.

Harry's burning rampage continued amidst more slicing and cutting hexes digging into his flesh. The Death Eaters were no longer running from the child but closing in on him determined to cut the boy down. A slice across the chest caused him to pause, a cut across the knees made him stumble...Yet Harry pushed on, determined to get away and survive.

It was a slicing hex to the head that finally stopped him. The curse cut across his right cheek stretching from his ear to curve up through his eye and onto his forehead. Harry screamed and fell clutching at

his decimated right eye the blood spilling down his face. The broken half of his wand fell to the grass in front of him as the Death Eaters barraged his body with slice after slice in retaliation of their fallen comrades. Harry was soon on the ground appearing as though hundreds of knives had ripped at his small person. His body was covered in horrendous cuts and it was all Harry could do just to breathe.

The barrage stopped only to make room for rough hands to grab Harry's bloodied arms and force him up onto his knees. One Masked figure gracefully approached the young man and leaned down in front of him to pick up the discarded half of Harry's wand. The core still burned as the masked Death Eater picked the broken stick up with delicate pale fingers and examined the piece of wood with feigned interest.

"My, my, Mr. Potter." The silky voice from earlier drawled, "It seems you have gone and broken your wand..." No one laughed as Lucius Malfoy paused to regard the broken teen before him, "A pity. It was such a...nice little piece of wood." He sneered, "I wonder..." He looked at the golden feather that poked out of the wood as though trying to unravel a secret before he pulled the broken wand back and brought it forward unexpectedly, plunging the sharp object into Harry's side.

A searing pain unlike anything Harry had thus far experienced started from inside of him and spread up through his veins to the surface of his skin. He writhed and screamed against his captors' hold and the wood protruding from his side exploded sending burning slivers of wood out in every direction. His Captors let go of him and stepped back in a surprise that quickly turned to fascination as fire began to lick along Harry's bloodied flesh. Harry's scream never ended and a plume of heat clawed its way up his throat searing his vocal cords as it erupted out of his mouth in a pillar of golden fire.

Harry's undamaged left eye stared up at the dark mark unseeing as

heat built up in his body just waiting to be released. A wave of burning air pulsed from the boy and incinerated his earlier captors on contact knocking down the rest of the Death Eater's who were yet to be dead. A second pulse ripped from Harry's trembling frame and lit the surrounding grass a-flame.

The remaining Death Eater's didn't wait for the third and final pulse; they quickly apparated out of the area sensing that if they stayed they would surely die.

It is fortunate the last Death Eaters apparated away when they had for the last and final pulse erupted in a cloud of flame that decimated the stables, the farm house, it's Muggle occupants, and half of the field.

As for Harry Potter, the bane of The Dark Lord and prodigy Boy-Who-Lived...He collapsed in the middle of the smoldering rubble with his clothes incinerated from his body, his wounds cauterized, and his mind blissfully unconscious.

News reports would later say that the mysterious explosion in Little Hangleton had been the result of a freak mixing of two volatile fertilizers. No news of who caused the accident; how ever, would never be revealed. For by the time the authorities had finally made it to the vacant site of the small farmstead no trace of the young Harry Potter would ever be found.

Three months after the mysterious explosion in the small town of Little Hangleton had a young woman with bushy brown hair uneasily crossing off a day on her calendar in the small moderate suburban home of her parents. Her pink lips twitched down in a frustrated frown as she gazed at the red marked date and held back the urge to simply break down in despair.

Over three months ago, the young woman approaching the tender age of fifteen had lost her best friend at a historic tournament at her

school. He had been on the verge of winning the renowned "Tri-Wizard Tournament" when he and his schoolmate, Cedric Diggory had vanished. Not even ten seconds later, Cedric Diggory had re-appeared on the field, his dead, cold hands clutching the crystal handles of the "Tri-Wizard Cup".

It was that moment she'd realized the cup had been converted to a portkey and that her dear friend Harry Potter was not with the corpse on the shocked-to-silence field. Chaos had soon erupted on the stands, teachers, students, ministry officials, and parents alike flowing down onto the field to confirm the obvious. Yet she, Hermione Granger, the school bookworm and cleverest witch of her age...had stood on the stands refusing to look the obvious in the face; refusing to accept that her best friend was either dead or in very real danger of becoming deceased that very moment.

The rest of the day had been a blur for the young witch, Dumbledore, the school Headmaster, had confirmed that the cup had indeed been converted into a portkey, but where the portkey had taken the late Cedric Diggory and Harry Potter was anyone's guess. Not soon after that the defense professor, Alastor Moody, disappeared in such a hurry that he left all of his effects in his office. After a thorough search of his office the ministry found a frail, malnourished Alastor Moody locked up at the bottom of his own trunk and realized that the man who had been teaching the students for the past year had been an imposter. A search of the surrounding country and an unfinished warrant for the unknown imposter was released while a nation-wide search began to try to find the missing Tri-Wizard fourth champion.

After three weeks with no sign of Hermione's friend the students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and their guests were sent home early after finishing their exams. Hermione spent a week with her other best friend Ronald Weasley and his large family in hope that news of Harry's re-appearance would reach her faster. Unfortunately any news about Harry's disappearance that was brought to the Weasley household was not good news and at the end

of that first week the ministry had had to deal with a huge burst of magical energy somewhere in a small town in the Eastern British country side. When they went to investigate they found a completely destroyed ground with the dark mark hovering over the middle of the field and the broken tip of a wand that Mr. Olivander later confirmed to have belonged to Harry Potter.

The Ministry believed Harry to be dead. The newspapers printed the news of his death that next day, and Hermione and Ron refused to believe the ministry's claim. Harry had been through worse and survived, so they decided that he couldn't possibly be dead.

Hermione had left for home that very night and for three months after that had been researching every form of magic she could think of that could possibly help her find her lost friend. Thus she was now marking off the days until the potion she had found for just that purpose would be finished. It was an advanced brew and delved even into the ancient forms of blood magic which made it a bordering "dark magic"...but she didn't care. Hermione knew her friend was alive, she could feel that he was out there. She felt that he was alive somewhere and in terrible torment.

The search for Harry Potter may have ended for the ministry but it was not over for the young Hermione Granger.

She sighed and leaned her forehead against the wall next to the calendar, her palm resting on the numbered days and her eyes closed in emotional exhaustion. She wanted to find Harry so badly; she needed to know he was safe and well. She couldn't sleep at night knowing he was somewhere out there...she had difficulty thinking about how quickly the ministry had been willing to give up and claim his death. Ron warned her to try to sleep, though he admitted to having the same feelings as her. She just couldn't understand how he could sit back and wait for the miracle they both knew would not occur, while she ran around searching for ways to

find Harry.

Yet, the feeling that he was alive and well was quickly fading. Each day that passed made her believe less and less that Harry was alive. It hurt to admit it to herself, but the knowledge that the boy had been missing for three months was a burden she had to accept. Even without the threat of a life in confinement under Merlin knew what conditions there was the frightening fact that he was somewhere out there alone. How would he survive on the streets or even in the country side for three months without money or food? The situation was beyond hopeless. Hermione knew this and yet...that voice in the back of her mind told her not to give up, not to stop looking. The voice told her he was out there and that all she'd have to do was step out and look.

Hermione pushed herself off the walls and walked to her desk to look over her notes again pausing on instinct to look outside her second story window at the quiet street that she'd grown up on. The street lights were lit, the moon was full and none of the house lights were on in the other homes across the street. The street was really quiet, but then she lived in a purely Muggle neighborhood. There would be no bangs from misguided spells as children got a hold of their parent's wands, and there would be no swoosh of flying broomsticks or popping noises of apparation.

Her neighborhood was as normal as the word could possibly get and it was the home she'd grown up in. She knew every nook and cranny of the street. Every crack in the paint of each house had been engraved into her mind since childhood. Every tree and weed that grew in the front yard of each consecutive house was a favorite painting to her mind and her memory noted each with a sense of deep comfort. She knew without a doubt the place of each trash can and each cobble of stone so it was no surprise that something looked off about her neighborhood on this dark, quiet, night.

Hermione narrowed her eyes confused scanning the street with

careful care looking for that something that was off from her memory of the street and its current image. There, on the ground floor next to her house, was the anomaly. She supposed it could just be a stray cat but Hermione knew all of the strays in the neighborhood as she was the one who left food out at night for them to eat. No, she decided, scrutinizing the shadow that seemed to be leaning against the trash can placed on the curb for Sanitation to come pick up, this shadow was not a cat. It was far too large a form to be a cat and it moved hunched over as though in great pain. She watched the shadow as it stumbled and ran into the trash can knocking the metal bin over with a crash.

Hermione didn't even think as she grabbed her wand and ran downstairs ahead of her sleepy father. The book worm carefully opened her front door silently thankful her father had oiled the hinges just last week so that she didn't alert whatever it was that was outside. She held her wand in front of her and walked cautiously toward the huddled form that shivered beside the fallen trash can and dug through the bin with grimy, bony hands.

Hermione whispered a quiet "lumos" that lit up the tip of her wand and shed a soft glow over the dirtied figure. She gasped in shock at the severely deformed boy that flinched from her light as though it burned. The boy was covered in grotesque scars that made his skin look as though large chunks had been shorn off of his bones and then re-grown in the wrong way. His face she could barely make out underneath the awful build up of scar tissue that had formed itself over his right eye and the scarring on the rest of his barely clothed form was just as bad giving all of his limbs a deformed hunched and bent look.

His body was obviously malnourished, his skin seemed stretched over protruding bones and some of the scars she was surprised to see were new, terrible, pussy, wounds. What was more, his grimy wild dark hair seemed to fly around his face like a mane and his single good brilliantly green eye was narrowed at her in a look of

extreme distrust. How the boy was alive and crouching before her was a complete mystery to Hermione. He looked as though he should have died long before he had been able to gain such scarring.

Yet...yet...There was something in that single green eye that pulled at her, recognition of sorts that she couldn't place with his deformed features. An urge to try to help him, to communicate welled up in her, and a sense that she was meant to find him thrummed through her being as they stared at each other.

Just as she was about to speak though, the boy spoke before her, his single bright eye having never left her own chocolate irises, "If you're going to try to hex me you might as well get on with it." He snarled.

Hermione's eyes widened, he knew what a wand was, and he expected her to hex him!

"I-I'm not going to hex you." She tried in a calming voice, "My names Hermione Granger and I want to help you."

The boy's eye widened as though shocked and then as quickly as the recognition of her name lit up in his eye it narrowed in sudden distrust. He shot out a hand and Hermione gasped as she felt hot air wrap around her throat and lift her up. She dropped her wand and grasped at her neck and the warm air that was closing itself around it.

"You lie!" The boy growled, "I won't fall for such tricks again Death Eater!" His fingers tightened and Hermione struggled against the invisible hand around her neck.

"Wait!" Hermione croaked gasping, "I am Hermione (gasp) Granger!" She coughed, "Why would," She opened her mouth painfully and pushed the words through her rapidly closing throat, "A Death Eater be in a muggle neighborhood?"

The boy narrowed his eye and dropped her. Hermione fell with a

crack to her knees and the boy wasted no time in pushing her roughly to the ground with a speed and strength she hadn't anticipated a hand pressed over her throat. He kicked her wand away into the street cautiously and viciously leaned toward her face.

"If you're Hermione," He growled harshly, "Then prove it."

"How?" Hermione asked desperately wondering where her father was and why he had not come out with her to inspect the disturbance.

"In you're second year at Hogwarts," The boy growled, "What potion did you brew illegally and where did you brew it?"

Hermione gasped suddenly understanding the recognition she had felt when she had looked into his green eye earlier, "Harry?" She asked daring to believe that this unrecognizable creature was her Harry Potter.

"Yes, but you'd know that wouldn't you?" He snarled, "Now answer the bloody question!"

Tears formed in her eyes at his answer but she mustered her courage and spoke to him bravely. Her brown eyes stared unblinkingly into his exhausted green iris hoping that he would recognize her by this single act of defiance. She could feel him shaking as he held her to the concrete sidewalk and she noticed how pale and warm he was. He looked as though he was going to pass out at any minute and she feared he might even die after that.

"I brewed Polyjuice potion in Moaning Myrtles bathroom so that you, Ron, and I would be able to infiltrate the Slytherin common room and find out who had opened the chamber of secrets." She intoned quietly her eyes never leaving his and her voice as gentle as she could muster it, "You and Ron thought it was Malfoy."

Harry jumped away from her in disbelief and shock at her honestly given answer. She knew that he was aware of the fact that only he, Ron, and she would know the answer to that question.

His breathing was layered with the effort of his actions and he looked at her in barely contained hope, "Merlin," He whispered hoarsely, "It's really you..." Then as though the strain was too much he collapsed to the ground unconscious.

Hermione panicked crawling over to her newly found friend frantically and cradling his unrecognizable head in her hands searching his scarred and dirty neck for a pulse. The boy was burning up with a high fever and some of his strange wounds were pussy and infected. She looked up and down the street frantically before screaming for her parents and trying to lift him enough to pull him inside.

Her father ran outside and took one look at the boy she was supporting before cursing and yelling to his wife. Lights flickered on up and down the street as her father and mother ran out to help her with her burden and it was decided to just put him in the car and get him to the hospital as soon as possible. Somewhere within the chaos of getting Harry into the car and to the hospital with neighbors helping to pull out the car and get him strapped in Hermione was able to retrieve her wand off of the street without raising suspicion.

It was only after The Granger's had checked the boy into the muggle hospital and he was carted off to emergency care, did Hermione owl Ron and Dumbledore telling them that she had found Harry. It was scant seconds later that the headmaster and his medi-witch Madam Pomfrey appeared in the hospital waiting room with two other wizard healers demanding to help treat the young boy. Only minutes after a heated argument with the Muggle doctors, which was won by the wizards, did a large group of red-heads tumble over to Hermione and her parents asking a multitude of questions that Hermione tried to answer with minimal confusion. Then after a blessedly long hour Hermione found herself scrunched between both of her families,

(one by blood and the other by friendship), leaning her head on Ron's shoulder and crying in exhaustion and uncontained worry.

Right, so It's eddited/replaced. As always Constructive criticism is welcome. If you don't have anything helpful to say and you're just looking to insult someone please don't do it here I will report you. Thank you that is all.

-Red

By the White Tiles

Light caressing his eyelids with a warm glow was the very first indication that Harry Potter was waking up. Warmth and the feeling of euphoria that Harry had always associated with numbing potions was the second. Harry wasn't even fully awake and he knew he was in a hospital ward of some sort.

His first instinct was to spread his senses outward from his body to get a feel of the room he was in and the people who shared the space with him. He'd been using his senses this way ever since the third time he had woken up from consciousness in the clutches of his enemies.

Harry had quickly learned that if his enemies still felt he were unconscious then he could learn more about them without their knowledge and that it was a way he could bide his time. This technique had saved his life on more than one occasion, and it was the sole reason he'd survived more than twelve ambushes over the last three months. Harry had practiced the technique so many times it had become second nature. It was a good way to gauge on whether or not he was in a relatively safe place and a good way to get the extra rest his body desperately needed.

Thus, tendrils of his magic stretched across the room like invisible fingers, feeling over the smooth surfaces of the walls and wedging its way into every nook and cranny. The vibrations in the air against the magic began to sketch an image within Harry's mind and the images told him that he was indeed in a hospital room. The room held four beds, one of which was occupied by Harry and the other three were empty. The feeling of sunlight against the right side of Harry's body told him that his bed was next to a window in the far corner of the room and that there were two other strong sources of magic sitting on either side of the Harry's bed.

Harry searched further and found that other than the two sources of

magic to either side of him; there was a distinct lack of power in the air. Whereas at Hogwarts magic permeated everything making the air constantly move and the ground and walls vibrate with the power around him...This place felt stale and distinctly still.

Harry pulled back his magic and tested the two magical beings beside him searching for that oily taint of dark magic that would give them away as Death Eaters. The magic to his left was certainly powerful, but it was a wild, barely tamed aura. Harry had noticed that the more wild magic often came from those of pure Muggle birth.

Harry suspected that the reason Muggle born magic is more wild is because it was of a different make to the pure-blooded's magic. It was a newer, more natural variation of magic. More elemental than the magic's he associated with Wizard-born children and he'd noticed that it tended to be stronger in the Muggle-born Witches as opposed to Muggle-born Wizards.

Just because one magic was more natural than the other didn't necessarily mean it was more powerful. Like many of the pure-blood Death Eaters he'd encountered, power levels in magic was often an illusion. While Muggle Born Witches and Wizards may have more aptitude for the more natural forms of magic pure-born Wizards and Witches had calmer, more controllable varieties of magic. Like the aura to his right. They had spent centuries honing and shaping the magic within them according to their wills giving it a different form and flexibility.

Muggle-born Witches and Wizards would have more aptitude to accidental magic and Wandless magic because of their magic's more naturally wild nature. Pure Bloods; however, had honed their skills so well with a wand and precise calculations that they lost their natural elemental abilities. Wandless magic would be completely impossible for them to use unless they had Muggle blood somewhere within their near to direct lineage. Pure Bloods could be frighteningly deadly with their accuracy when they cast spells and they had perfect

control with how much power they placed into one spell often with very minimal effort.

So really, the power of a Witch or Wizard depended on how they each were able to use their abilities and to what extent. One form of magic was not "more powerful" than the other and where one form would fail the other form could gain an advantage and vice-versa. Harry wasn't sure if his assumptions were at all correct from his own observations. He supposed one day he'd fly them by Hermione and allow her to find the answers to his assumptions but as it stood, Harry was fairly positive that the person to his left was a Muggle born Witch or Wizard and the person to his right was most likely a Pure Blood.

Harry came out of his musings and slowly opened his eyes to the bright, white-washed room, allowing the rest of his senses to awaken as he did so. He noticed then who was sleeping next to him in chairs situated beside his bed. The one on his left was clutching his heavily bandaged hand and a bushy wave of brown hair lay beside the hand. Harry's eyes softened as he watched the shoulder of the hand's owner rise and fall in a steady rhythm. He remembered this young woman. It was she who had rescued him off the street in front of her Muggle home. Hermione Granger. She was the definite owner of the wild magic. Harry closed his eyes and allowed his magic to reach out toward hers memorizing the recognizable feel of her magical signature. Why he was doing it, he wasn't entirely sure, but Harry felt it was important.

Harry was surprised by the second warm weight on his other hand. The hand clutching Harry's right one was larger than Hermione's, more callused. Harry followed the long, gangly arm with his eye having to turn his head to get a better look at who else was sleeping beside his bed. Harry noted with some surprise that it was Ron; his other best friend, leaning back sprawled awkwardly in his uncomfortable chair. Harry smiled fondly. The youngest Weasley boy had a gift for being able to sleep anywhere he laid his head. Harry

had remembered Ron as he looked for safe places to sleep over the past three months. As he had with Hermione, Harry closed his eyes and made sure to memorize the feel of Ron's aura. Harry was grateful his surrogate brother was there.

A soft beeping noise alerted Harry to a machine to his right behind Hermione that had digital numbers and moving lines displayed across the flat screened surface droning. Cords and tubes ran from Harry to the machine and plastic bags of dark and clear liquids that were being pumped into Harry slowly. He was surprised he hadn't noticed it earlier as it was a distinct indication that Harry was in a Muggle hospital.

Harry allowed his muscles to slump back into the soft mattress and relished in the feel of an actual bed. He supposed he could do without the itchy, scratchy, bandages that covered his body from head to foot but Harry decided he couldn't really complain. It was a small price for the luxury he now found himself in. The mattress was the softest he'd ever remembered it and the warmth given from his thin blankets were heaven to Harry's constantly cold body.

The door to the empty room opened and Harry tensed as he watched a woman dressed as a nurse walk in. She smiled kindly at Harry and after making sure the woman was no Witch Harry carefully tried to smile back. What the woman received looked closer to a lopsided grin than a smile but Harry attributed that to half of his face being completely numb.

"Good afternoon." The nurse greeted in a whisper being careful not to wake his friends. "I'm glad to finally have a conscious patient!" She grinned, "You've been unconscious for four days! We were beginning to worry that we may have done something wrong in the surgery."

Harry opened his mouth to ask, 'what surgery?' but found his throat wouldn't allow sound to come out. For a moment he looked at the nurse stricken before she chuckled reassuringly.

"Don't worry if you can't talk yet." She began scooting around Hermione to check the monitor he was hooked up to with a clip-board and pen in hand, "From the scaring that lined you throat it's a miracle you could talk at all before we had a shot at healing you. You have some heavy burn damage to you're vocal chords, but the doctors think you will heal. They think you'll be able to talk again within a week or so...something about the new doctors that call themselves 'healers' having a miracle medicine or something like that."

Harry nodded numbly and she continued whispering, "As for the surgery, we had to put you under so that we could calm you body down. We had to re-brake a lot of your bones and re-open more then half of your wounds so that we could scrape some of the scar tissue out of you're muscles." She looked at the deathly pale boy and his stricken expression and smiled apologetically, "I'm sorry, this all may come as quite a shock to you but I was told to let you know what we put you through when you awoke and how we're going to help you heal properly."

"Speaking of healing," She plowed on, "you'll be receiving vitamins and other various pills, which are the regular treatment, and you'll be consuming," Here she frowned as though troubled by what she was about to tell the boy as she read from her clipboard, "Blood-replenishing potions, Numbing potions, Burn Salve, Tissue regeneration potions and...oh this is ridiculous, you're other doctor will tell you what this all means." She waved the clip board around in the air frustrated as though doing so would wipe the words clean of the paper.

She scooted back around Hermione and went to the other side of Harry's bed where she pulled out a few tubes from his arm and replaced them with new ones, "Potions, honestly, what do they expect me to tell you? That you're going to be treated by magic?" She muttered to herself crossly, "Let's just say that Merlin is going to walk into the room to make everything all better and that Arthur

would be here too but he's stuck in traffic!"

She looked at Harry with a cross expression, her painted red lips formed in a strait line and her blue eyes blazing, "Potions," She exclaimed exasperated, "If this is some practical joke by someone in the head office they will be answering to me! Mark my words. You just don't do things like that in a hospital! They have no shame! I'm sorry Mr. Evans...It seems my department is having difficulty remembering what's more important, their humor or a patient's piece of mind!"

With the end of her tirade, the irate Nurse swept out of the room ready to bite the ear off of some unsuspecting official for upsetting her patient and making her sound like an unprofessional fool.

Harry would have laughed if he had been able to, but he was beaten to it as a smiling Hermione made her presence known as she watched the Nurse storm out of the room. Harry watched the woman too, confused as to why she would call him "Mr. Evans".

"Every nurse has been doing that since you arrived." She explained, "You should have seen Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey when the Doctors tried to refuse their assistance! They told Madam Pomfrey she didn't have a clue what she was doing and you can imagine how she responded to that! Dumbledore had to wipe three memories and reverse two hexes!"

"If you're wondering at the name, I did that when we checked you in...I worried that if I used you're last name it'd be recognized by some squib or another. Dumbledore was the one who encouraged me not to change it back after he got here." She smiled at him and gently squeezed his hand, "It's good to see you awake." He noticed the hint of red at the edge of her eyes and worriedly wondered if she'd been crying.

"I owled Ron and Dumbledore the minute we got you checked in."

She informed Harry, "Dumbledore wasted no time in arriving here with the healer's and Madam Pomfrey by his side. Ron said the minute he'd read the letter I'd sent his family tumbled over themselves to get here." She laughed, "As it was they arrived a half hour after Dumbledore had and they were horribly sorry about it too. They and my parents are out getting some lunch, Ron and I decided to stay, something told us you'd be waking up soon."

"It was all the ruddy twitching you were doing." A groggy voice to the right of him muttered, "You hadn't been twitching nearly as much as you had been today. Hermione and mum fussed over weather or not you'd disturb you're bandages with all the 'movement'."

Ron head rolled his eyes, "Women, I tell you." He stated as he woke up grinning.

Harry grinned lopsidedly at his surrogate brother as Hermione frowned at Ron. But the frown didn't last long. Soon her lips were trembling as tears welled up in her eyes again.

"Oh Harry," Her voice trembled, "We had thought...The ministry claimed you to be dead a week after you're disappearance. The Dark Mark was found over a charred field and the tip of you're wand was found at the edge of the field by the remains of a stable!" She quickly stated as she spilled out all of her worries, "Death Eater sightings have been increasing and rumors that Voldemort is back have been circling for days! The Prophet isn't helping either, their trying to keep everything hushed up by blaming Dumbledore for you're supposed "Death". I'd almost given up hope that you were still alive!" Harry squeezed her hand not knowing what else to do.

He looked at Ron for support but Ron was silent, staring at their clasped hands with an unreadable expression on his face. Harry wanted to say something to reassure Hermione, and apparently Ron as well, but knew that he couldn't. He looked into Hermione's eyes helplessly trying to reassure her. The message was read; Hermione

nodded back to him and stood taking her hand out of his in favor of carefully hugging him to her and leaning against the bed.

"I'm so glad I found you...that you found me." She whispered in his ear.

Harry felt a single wet tear fall against his left un-bandaged cheek and carefully wrapped his left arm around his best friend.

"I'm so relieved," She sighed, "Just, so relieved..."

"Yeah, mate." Ron squeezed Harry's hand, "I'd thought I'd lost a brother for a while there..."

The Trio fell into silence. The three stayed like that for a while, Hermione crushed against him and Ron's calmer support beside him. Harry relished in the comforting warmth that came from such an embrace, even with his stiff arms and numb back. All of them relished the feeling of being together again, of being whole after so much uncertainty and fear. Hermione pulled herself away from Harry and he felt peaceful and strangely light after the embrace.

"You should get back to sleep." Hermione stated after sitting back in her chair and taking his hand in her own again, "Sleep is healing Harry, and considering how far you've got to go in the healing department, you're going to need that sleep."

"We'll still be here when you wake up." Ron added.

They smiled and Harry graced his two friends with a weak, lopsided grin and easily fell back to sleep.

"You're sure he's not dead?" A voice muttered above and to the right of Harry followed by an, "OW! Ginny! Why'd you hit me?"

"Because you're sister was trying to show you manners George!" A

larger, motherly, voice hissed down and to Harry's left, "you shouldn't be talking about death at a time like this!"

"But Mother," This voice was somewhere at the foot of Harry bed, "George has a point, he dose look a bit peaky..."

"He's sick for Merlin's sake," The woman's voice sighed exasperated, "Not dead!"

"A bit green too." A fourth voice put in agreeably.

"Arthur!" Said the matron, "Don't you dare egg them on!"

"No," George intoned inquisitively, "It's not exactly a green color is it? Fred?"

"No, not green...", Fred answered, "It's more like a particular shade of scarlet."

Harry couldn't hold in the laughter that had been bubbling up inside him any longer. He shot open his eye as he laughed silently grinning lopsided at the sea of red heads that had completely surrounded his bed. His eye landed on each consecutive Weasley as he came to them and all of them were beaming back at Harry as though he were the greatest thing they had ever laid eyes on. Harry was even surprised to see Bill and Charlie standing amongst their younger siblings.

"Well it took you long enough," Bill intoned well naturedly.

"We've been waiting for days for you to wake up and the time you finally do our idiot brother is sleeping!" Ginny intoned grinning, "Welcome back to the world of the living Harry."

"It's good to see you." Charlie nodded to Harry.

"Indeed." George nodded with a 'serious' face earning another one of Ginny's elbows to his side.

Harry just grinned

"Oh, Harry..." Mrs. Weasley stood with her hands clasped together under her breasts with unshed tears, "Oh dear, we thought that...We worried...Oh!" She scooted around next to Harry and threw her large arms around him and cried.

Harry flinched but tried not to show it as the numbing potions were beginning to wear off and a wave of pain jolted through his back. Harry suppressed the pain with practiced ease as he tried to comfort the Weasley matron.

She eventually scooted away from him whipping her eyes as she smiled, "I am very happy you are back." She explained.

Harry thought he'd be hearing that a lot over the course of the next few hours and he was right. The Weasleys made the hospital room one of their permanent dwellings, conjuring chairs and tables. Mrs. Weasley placed a home-nit blanket over Harry and Mr. Weasley inspected the machines that were monitoring Harry's vitals muttering hypotheses under his breath. Bill and Ron set up a card game that Fred, George and Ginny joined while Charlie and Arthur conversed on the technologies that Muggles have developed.

At noon a healer, followed by the Grangers came in. The healer pursed her lips at the number of people in the room and gave Harry several potions Harry had trouble keeping down including a sleeping potion. The Weasleys and Grangers went and ate dinner while Harry slept and only Mrs. Granger, Mrs. Weasley, Ron, and Hermione came back and stayed until they were kicked out.

For weeks The Weasleys and Grangers made sure Harry was never alone in the hospital. Dumbledore came by twice and joined the

families in keeping Harry company. After the first week, the potions the healer's gave him had completely healed his vocal cords and he surprised his nurse to a near-faint by greeting her verbally as she walked in. Harry asked Dumbledore what they were doing about magic secrecy and Dumbledore replied simply that every doctor working with the healers were under oath and that while Harry was in the hospital his surname was "Evans" for Harry's safety. When Harry asked why he had to go by his mother's last name in the hospital Dumbledore replied: He simply felt that the Wizarding media had made such effort convincing the world that Harry was dead that it would be quite a shame to have to prove them wrong.

Dumbledore asked for Harry's account of what had happened to him after the portkey activated and where it had taken him. Harry didn't answer right away; he lifted his left arm to Dumbledore and told him quietly about the cemetery in Little Hanging and about the stables and the ambush. He told Dumbledore about his broken wand and about how he had been stabbed with it and the effects of the death eaters having done so. Dumbledore listened until Harry couldn't talk anymore and carefully placed a hand on Harry's shoulder the twinkle that normally appeared in his eyes completely extinguished.

Then Harry told Dumbledore in a whisper about the connection. How Voldemort always seemed to know where Harry was and how Harry could feel the dark lord when he concentrated on him.

"Harry," Dumbledore stated gravely, "You mustn't try to feel Voldemort."

"I know," Harry whispered staring at the tiled floor, "I don't want to feel him. I don't want to know why he feels emotion or when. I sometimes fear that he's there, constantly watching, listening to everything I see, or hear...I try to always think about something dull, something that won't give away what's in my mind. I imagine a wall, a completely impenetrable wall where he can't reach me. I like to think that it works, but then he'll feel some strong emotion and I'll feel it

and I'll know that the wall isn't enough...that he's inside the wall..."

Harry was trembling as he looked up at his mentor, "I don't know what to do. I try to think only about the white ceiling because I think there are so many white ceilings out there...I hope I can fool him, but I don't know if it's enough!" Dumbledore was silent as he watched his young charge begin to break in front of him.

Harry's whole body shook, he clutched the blankets in his bandaged fists and a heat began to rise around him disturbing the air. His Green eye was focused on his hands and tears were building up at the edges of his eye-lid. His expression was completely hopeless and terrified as he spoke.

"At first, when I got here," Harry continued, "I'd thought it was over, I thought I'd be safe, but I can feel him searching for me. I can feel him as I lay here at night; he's trying to get into the rest of my mind, to get past my image of the ceiling. I can't let him, I...I feel so...disgusting...Like I've been raped, like I've been tainted by this...monster!"

He looked back up to Dumbledore, "Do you have any idea what that feels like?" He asked, his voice trembling, "Do you know what it feels like to have someone in you're head? Is there anything I can do...to get him out?" The flowers beside Harry's bed burst into flames startling the boy enough to pull him out of his intense emotions.

Harry jumped and stared at the flowers silently as Dumbledore calmly extinguished the flames with his wand, now unable to look at his headmaster directly. He hadn't planned on spilling all of those emotions out to the older man, and he was afraid of what he'd see in those ancient eyes if he dared look in them again. Would it be shame or repulsion that would reflect back at Harry through those blue, twinkling eyes? Would he even look at Harry? The tortured boy sat, staring at the charred remains of the flowers allowing the image of the black petals to fill his vision.

While he'd been on the run, Harry had discovered his strange connection to his parent's murderer on accident. He'd accidentally entered the Sadist's mind and immediately regretted it as He realized Voldemort then knew exactly where he was. Death eaters had been upon him within seconds and Harry still didn't know how he'd gotten out of their clutches alive. Ever since that moment he'd felt Voldemort at the edge of his thoughts pulling out images and feelings from Harry on a regular basis. Harry began inserting dull images that were so common that they could be found anywhere each time he felt Voldemort reach for him. It was a small victory for Harry every time he felt the unnatural Wizard's frustration.

"Harry," Dumbledore gently intoned, "Harry look at me please."

Harry carefully turned his head and glanced at the headmaster surprised to not only see a deep weariness but also a sorrow that made the old man look even older. Harry was grateful not to see either shame or fear in the tired eyes.

"Unfortunately," Dumbledore began, "I do know what it feels like to have a foreign mind invade my own."

Dumbledore took off his bifocals and rubbed the ridge of his nose as he sighed, "It is a very difficult technique known to the Wizarding world as 'Legillimacy'. It's not truly a spell, but an incantation can help a Witch or Wizard achieve it. Once a Witch or Wizard becomes proficient in the art, all they would need to do is look into another human beings eye and they'd have instant access to that persons mind."

"But Voldemort's never been near enough to look into my eyes." Harry argued, "How can he enter my mind without eye contact?"

"Some Wizards," Dumbledore explained, "Are so proficient at the art of Legillimacy that they never need eye contact in order to tell what

another person is thinking...but in you're case I fear you're scar is what created the link between you and Voldemort."

Harry looked stricken at Dumbledore's answer and stared down at the bed, "So, there's no way..." He swallowed a lump of hopelessness that was beginning to form in his throat, "No way to keep him out?"

"Well," Dumbledore leaned back in his chair with his fingers folded together contemplatively, "There is a way that one can defend the mind against a Legillimens. Although I am not sure how effective it will be in you're case...you all ready used some of the very techniques that are used to defend the mind. Inserting images of dull objects to throw you're attacker off course for instance; you may have the correct aptitude to learn Occlumency."

"Occlumency?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Yes," Dumbledore nodded, "It requires multitasking and intense concentration but I believe you will be able to master it with some practice. In the meantime I can place a ward on you're mind until you have fully mastered the defending art. Professor Snape may be of some help in you're study--"

"No." Harry growled immediately, "He's a Death Eater, even if it is just to spy! I'm not going near him!"

Dumbledore nodded gravely, the trauma the boy had gone through at the hands of Death Eaters would make potions class very difficult within the next year. Dumbledore couldn't blame him for his animosity and distrust of Professor Snape and he wouldn't pitch the boy against the head of Slytherin if he could help it until Harry was ready to face a known Death Eater on his own. So he nodded agreeably to the boy to calm him down before speaking.

"Understandable." Dumbledore said, "Then I suppose that I will have to instruct you myself."

"Thank you professor," Harry relaxed visibly.

"Albus." Dumbledore corrected, "If you are to be my direct pupil then you will call me by my name." He smiled at Harry and was rewarded with a twitch of the corner of the boy's mouth.

"I don't know if I can." Harry said truthfully.

"Then practice!" Albus smiled, the twinkle returning for a moment before becoming serious again, "Now about your wand. I have a theory as to why it reacted as it had when you were stabbed with it, but I am going to have to research it a bit further before I am sure. I believe that the core of you're wand may have reacted with you're magical core. If I am correct, it would be the reason for the sudden change in you're magical signature as well as you're new pyro-abilities."

"How did the core of my wand react to the core of my magic exactly?" Harry asked.

"Well," Dumbledore caulked his head to the side inquisitively, "I can't be sure, of course, as no record of a Wizard being stabbed by his own wand has ever been reported...but it is my belief that the core of your wand merged with your own magical core. This would enhance your magic and change the signature as well as give you a few of the basic abilities that the core all ready possessed on it's own."

Harry stared at him wide eyed as Dumbledore nodded to himself, "Yes," Dumbledore muttered, "It would explain the fire affinity...phoenix feather was it?"

Harry nodded.

"A wand core is a curious thing on its own," Dumbledore continued, "Especially cores that come from a magical animal." He nodded to himself again, "Yes, I believe I will have to do more research before this mystery is solved." He smiled and stood, "As far as your Occlumency training goes, we will have to keep it a secret for the time being as the art is considered difficult enough to be categorized as a bordering dark ability by the ministry." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at Harry conspiringly.

"For now I will be giving you reading material to help prepare you for the training that I expect Miss Granger to tutor you in when you receive them." Dumbledore placed his wizened old hand on Harry's unruly head, "And I must ask permission to enter your mind in order to place the wards on you."

Harry nodded slowly his eyes guarded as he looked at Dumbledore, "I...trust you. I just, I'm wary of anyone else being in here." He gestured at his head, "Two people are more than enough as far as I'm concerned."

"I know my boy," Dumbledore sighed, "But in order to place the wards on your mind I need access to your thoughts so that I can be sure to keep Voldemort as far out of your head as I can possibly keep him. I will give you fair warning when I do it and I promise not to look into anything you don't want me to very closely."

Harry looked down at his hands as he thought carefully on his decision. After running through the pros and cons of allowing Dumbledore into his head he decided to allow Dumbledore to ward his mind in whatever manner Dumbledore needed to do so.

"All right," He looked into Dumbledore's sparkling blue eyes, "Do what you must."

Dumbledore nodded and sat on the bed situating himself in front of Harry so as to make better eye-contact. He placed both of his hands

on the sides of Harry's head and looking into Harry's single green eyes he muttered a soft, "Legillimens" in warning.

Instantly Harry felt as though a soft breeze were caressing his thoughts quickly running through his mind. Harry's wall shimmered powerfully before his mind's eyes and the breeze ran around it sparkling against the grey stone. The breeze fell into all of the cracks stretching itself protectively around Harry's mind. An oily feeling of rage began to build up too quickly for the breeze to react. Harry screamed as pain coursed through his head and down his spine as the green, burning oil pushed at the dancing breeze trying to prevent the ward from being placed. Yet the breeze held its protective position and slowly, carefully pushed the sickly presence out of Harry's mind.

Harry felt stillness, a silence in his thoughts. The warm breeze pulled itself out of Harry's mind and for the first time in three months he was just Harry. No dark influence was pushing against him for access. No foreign feelings or thoughts penetrated his mind. For once, Harry was finally, truly alone.

Harry closed his eye in relief, his mind and his thoughts thoroughly at peace.

"Thank you." He whispered.

"I am sorry that the experience was so unpleasant." Dumbledore apologized, "I'd hoped that Voldemort wouldn't be able to detect my presence, I fear he was more deeply rooted within you than I had anticipated."

Harry nodded as Dumbledore placed his hand on Harry's left shoulder, "I am glad you told me about this Harry." He looked at Harry gravely, "I fear if you had waited any longer I may not have been able to help you at all. Your training is going to have to begin immediately. The ward will only last for so long..."

Harry nodded again.

"For now though, I will let you sleep." Dumbledore stated standing up, "I will come back to visit tomorrow and you will be receiving your books." With a swish of his bright robes and a wink Dumbledore turned and was gone.

Harry watched the old man go allowing the silence of the room and of his mind to soak into him as he fell asleep once again. This time though, it was a peaceful, undisturbed sleep; the likes of which Harry had forgotten of months ago.

The 'Ripple' Effect

"Occlumency is the art of defending ones mind against outward intrusion'...Harry where'd you get this?"

Harry was sitting in his bed playing Muggle chess on a table with Ron. Hermione sat to the left of Harry. Her eyes were riveted to a book held open in her lap. Her wildly frizzy hair was held back in a loose ponytail at the base of her neck with a few rebellious strands falling into her face.

"I've only read mentions about Occlumency in my books. It's a very complicated magic, and isn't it considered dark by the ministry?" She asked incredulously.

Harry moved his Rook over three spaces capturing one of Ron's knights, "Yes," He replied, "Dumbledore mentioned it."

"Dumbledore!" Hermione exclaimed surprised, "Dumbledore gave you this book?"

Ron took Harry's Rook and the bandaged boy frowned, "Yeah, he's going to train me in Occlumency and thought you might enjoy the read."

Hermione's facial expression flattened, "You mean he knew I would read the book and tell you what's in it." She stated emotionlessly.

"That sounds about right," Harry nodded and moved his king out of the line of Ron's second knight.

Ron grinned as Hermione rolled her eyes and closed the book with a resounding "snap"! Both boys jumped, Ron knocked over his queen which in turn crashed into Harry's king and sent both pieces to the floor.

"Oi!" Ron cried, "What'd you go and do that for?"

Hermione didn't answer him; instead she stared unblinkingly at Harry. Harry stared back, secretly amazed at how he could feel chills run down his spine at her blank expression. He could feel her ire at him in waves and Harry could sense the beginning of sweat form on the back of his neck. Even Ron froze under that gaze wondering as to why she was giving Harry such a look. Normally Ron was the recipient of her disappointment, not Harry.

Harry leaned back pushing himself against the raised back of the bed suddenly wanting to be as far from his best friend as he could possibly get. Hermione raised a single eyebrow and suddenly Harry felt terribly ashamed without even understanding why. She raised the book above the bed and slowly, firmly, placed it next to Harry her brown eyes never leaving his. Her expression never changed, she never spoke a word, and she didn't move. Hermione's hands were still on the book as she watched Harry like a cat would watch a terrified mouse, and Harry visibly flinched.

"All right," He finally said gulping, "I'll read it."

Hermione gave him a small smirk and nodded as though that was all she needed to hear. She stood and walked calmly around the bed to sit next to Harry on his bed and take over his game of chess with Ron. Ron didn't even protest. He simply re-set the board and began to play. Hermione smiled at Harry as the boy dejectedly opened the ancient tome that had been given to him and turned to teach Ron the finer points of Muggle Chess.

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Harry quietly practiced the breathing exercises the book told him to do.

'Inhale through the nose...1...2...3...4...exhale through the

mouth...1...2...3...4...' and so on and so fourth.

He'd been doing the exercises religiously since he'd read about them in the second section of the first chapter of his Occlumency book. It was incredibly calming and Harry could feel his magic ebb and flow with each inhale and exhale that he took. Hermione had eventually read the book, her curiosity had been too strong for her to ignore it, and she had joined Harry, (dragging Ron into it as well) in reading from the book and exorcising the steps with him. Harry didn't want to admit that he was grateful to his friends for doing this with him, although he wasn't sure how Dumbledore would react when he found out about their participation.

Then again, the old codger probably all ready knew about them and decided, as he usually did, to let them figure it out for themselves.

Harry hadn't told Hermione or Ron why he needed to learn Occlumency, and he hoped he'd never have to...but he knew Hermione was suspicious. She never asked him out loud, but the clever witch had a way of reading Harry that the boy assumed had to be completely unnatural. As well as a way to get what she wanted out of him. Harry smiled slightly as he exhaled slowly. He figured this power Hermione had over him had to be a female trait as Ginny could often do the same thing to her brothers. He'd witnessed her silent control over the other males of the Weasley family so many times that he was almost positive Hermione had learned the strange spell from her.

Still, it was only a matter of time until Hermione asked him the inevitable question: Why was it Dumbledore felt it was important for Harry to learn Occlumency? Which would mean Harry would have to tell her and Ron why exactly Harry needed to guard his mind. Harry dreaded the moment he'd have to tell them. He feared their reactions just as he had feared Dumbledore's reaction to Harry's dark confession.

How would they react when they learned Harry was undeniably connected to the evil Lord Voldemort? How would Ron react? Hermione would probably accept it and the fact that Harry was trying to prevent it from impacting his life too much. But Ron?

Ron had grown up in a world where the very name Voldemort was complete Taboo to speak out loud. His best Mate had grown up fearing and hating the very idea of the Dark Lord. How would he react to Harry knowing he was connected to the bastard? How would he view Harry when he found out that Voldemort had complete access to Harry's head?

Harry didn't want to think about it. He didn't want Ron to see him as anything different then the brother he'd been to him for the past four, (soon to be five), years! Harry knew Ron could be a prejudice Pratt. Harry had witnessed his surrogate brother's ignorant assumptions first hand on more then one occasion. Harry feared losing his best friend with his confession. He feared loosing the only family he'd ever known.

So Harry didn't respond to Hermione's questioning responses, he didn't respond to her silent askance as the trio went through Dumbledore's Occlumency book each day. He completely ignored the confused glances that ran between his two best friends whenever he would stop talking in the middle of conversation to stare unblinkingly up at the ceiling. He just wasn't ready to face his own fears and tell them about how Voldemort constantly tested the barriers of the ward Dumbledore had placed on his mind or even why. It wasn't something he was going to willingly confess, not if he could keep them in the dark for just a little while longer.

"Mr. Evans." His nurse walked into the room pushing Harry out of his thoughts, "Good morning!" She smiled brightly and Harry noticed a witch healer walk up behind her wearing a Muggle Doctor outfit.

"You're doctor is here to check if you are ready to begin to re-take

your first steps!" She grinned happily, "Isn't that exciting?"

Harry smiled weakly at the woman and eyed the healer suspiciously. After testing her magical signature for any oily taint and finding none he relaxed more fully even going so far as to give the nurse a genuine smile.

"I don't know about 'steps' but we do need to take a look at those arms." The witch intoned from behind the nurse, "You have been keeping up the physical exercises your therapist has been giving you correct?"

"Yes," Harry replied, "I've kept up with the exercises she's given me," Harry gestured to the large blue rubber bands that sat beside his bed, "I do each arm for an hour switching off at twenty minute intervals just like Healer Jensen told me."

"Good, good." The witch nodded smiling, "Well what I want to do first today is take off the bandages on your arms. The healing should be finished on those at least, and then I want you to demonstrate your physical therapy exercises so that I can make sure we healed everything correctly." She frowned at the bustling nurse as the Muggle woman carefully removed his bandages, "I want to be sure the Muggle doctors didn't botch up our hard work before we move on to the challenge of getting you to stand."

Harry smiled bemused at the Witch's obvious dislike of Muggle healing methods. He'd been observing the professional rivalry that had been building between the Muggle and wizard doctors with growing amusement. He figured that their bickering didn't really matter so long as he got properly healed, and it gave him some entertainment to focus on in the boring hospital bed.

Harry turned his attention to the Nurse as she unwound each layer of bandages excitedly. This had been one of the long lasting arguments between the two world's professional healers. The magic that had

been placed in Harry's bandages had prevented the Muggle doctors and nurses from removing the bandages. The doctors had argued long over the need to remove and change his bandages in case of an infection and the Healers had stated that healing spells were woven into the very fabric of the gauze and that to remove them would be disastrous. Apparently infection would be impossible as long as he wore the special fabric. The gauze was made specifically for the purpose they needed and it was incredibly expensive to manufacture so it would be difficult to replace if removed too early.

Harry had heard this all from a very exasperated Hermione and could only be amused at the clashing world views of the people around him. He had been slightly worried about leaving filthy bandages on him for Merlin knew how long but decided from experience to just let the healers do what they needed to do. So now he stared in amazement at the relatively normal arm that began to be revealed from underneath a row of encrusted, bloody bandages.

The Healer pointed her wand at Harry's arm and cleaned any dry blood and puss away from his skin. She frowned at the patchwork of thin scars that riddled his otherwise normal skin as the nurse gapped at his arm baffled.

"Hmm..." The witch muttered, "You shouldn't have retained any of the scars from the lacerations..."

Harry didn't particularly care about weather or not his skin was scarred, he was staring at the shape of his arm and hands. A bit skinny, it was. Pale, it was. But back to the proportions that it was supposed to be was what got him to tear up. The arm was no longer a deformed mass that was always stiff and looked as though he were part Ogre. His hand was a hand again, not an awkward stump with unmovable appendages sticking out at odd angles.

He slowly clenched his fist and closed his eye relishing in the feel of working muscles as a ripple coursed down his arm up to his shoulder.

He was vaguely aware of the Nurse hurriedly unwrapping his left arm only to gasp a second time as she witnessed the same results. Harry opened his eyes to his second miracle. His eye raked across his left arm. It too was riddled with hash-marked scars including one angry red scar that graced the inside of Harry's left wrist to his elbow.

He stared at that scar for a while remembering what it represented and wanting it to be covered again. He closed his eye and steeled himself before looking at the disbelieving Muggle Nurse and the frowning Witch who was cleaning his skin with her wand.

"All right Mr. Evans," She handed him the rubber-band, "Your exercises if you please."

Harry nodded ignoring the blemish on his left arm and grabbed the rubber band. He thrust his right fist out carefully relishing in the feel of his muscles working properly for a change as he brought his left fist to his chest holding the rubber band taught for seven seconds in his head. He slowly brought his right arm back to his chest before thrusting it out again. After doing that two more times, he repeated the action with his left hand being thrust outward and his right hand sitting squarely against his chest.

His next exercise was to hold both fists out in front of him together and pull them apart slowly to each side of him. He did that again for his next exercise but instead of pushing his arms out to either side of him he pulled his left down to his waist and his right arm up above his head.

Harry was grinning as he did his exercises. It was so much easier to do them without all of the itchy bandages hindering his movement.

The Medi-Witch smiled as Harry displayed his arms' full range of movement. She was pleased that they had been able to heal him. She remembered the deformed boy that had been brought into the hospital just weeks before and she was proud that they were able to

give him his arms back.

"Excellent." She exclaimed checking off something on her clip-board, "Now I need you to sit on the edge of your bed with your legs dangling off the edge please."

Harry did as he was asked and winced as his legs succumbed to natural gravity, "That hurts a bit." He informed the witch.

She nodded, "I thought as much," She jotted something else on her clip-board, "Can you swing your feet back and fourth?"

Harry did but immediately stopped his face scrunched up in pain.

"I see." The Witch muttered, "Well, then we'll start this slowly," She looked to the nurse, "I need a wheel chair, please bring one quickly."

The nurse nodded and quickly left the room.

The Witch turned back to Harry, "You are going to start sitting in a wheel chair a couple of hours a day, two broken legs are not easy things to heal quickly and the amount of time you had put weight on them prior to coming here could have caused permanent damage. Even with magic we may never be able to heal them fully." She grimaced as though what she was about to admit caused her great pain, "But I suppose that's where the Muggle doctors specialize in you're treatment. I hate to admit it, but I've never seen such skill in re-breaking and then mending bones as I had when we worked with the Muggles on you in surgery."

Harry looked at the woman surprised and she took his gaze to mean he found a Muggles skill in medicine greater then her own confession. When he was really looking at her like that because he couldn't believe she actually admitted it.

"I know," She nodded oblivious, "Amazing thought isn't it? Their

barbaric ways of healing may have saved your legs."

Harry nodded slowly amused at the woman in front of him, "Yeah," He said secretly imagining Hermione's shock at the Witch's ignorance, "Amazing."

"Yes," The Medi-witch plowed on, "Aside from that, as long as you are unable to stand we are just going to have to be patient and work on getting your legs used to gravity again."

The Nurse walked in with a wheel chair and a Muggle doctor who stared at Harry's arms with the same amount of disbelief as the Nurse had. The Doctor and the Medi-witch looked at each other, and though Harry had no idea as to what happened between the two, the Doctor frowned defeated and The Medi-Witch grinned in triumph. She bounced toward Harry with a victorious gait.

"Right then," She smiled at the scowling doctor, "Shall we start your first term in the wheel chair now?"

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"I told you Ron, there are wavelengths in the air that allow Muggles to communicate through things called cell phones! It's not magic its science!"

Hermione and Ron walked in that afternoon arguing over the cell phone that Hermione's parents had given her to use to contact them while she visited with Harry. Ron couldn't believe how the wireless contraption could work and Hermione was trying to explain to Ron the scientific reasons as to why cell phones could work without magic.

"And I'm telling you its bloody impossible!" Ron growled, "With or without this 'psyance' thing!"

Harry watched his two best friends enter the room with amusement. If it wasn't the nurse and the healer arguing, Harry could always find entertainment from his two best friends constant bickering. He waited patiently for them to notice him in the wheelchair by the window as they automatically moved toward his bed and sat in their normal seats on either side of it.

"Muggles are a lot more advanced then Wizards give them credit for," Hermione admonished, "Your blatant refusal to accept that cell phones work is a prime example of such ignorance!"

The two continued their argument over Harry's empty bed. Harry leaned back in his wheel chair with his bare hands folded neatly in his lap, wondering how long it would take them to realize that he wasn't in his usual spot between them.

"But that's just ridiculous!" Ron countered, "Even Floo calls are connected somehow! These cell-phone-thingies have nothing connecting them to any other phones! How is it possible for a call to even reach another phone without some tie in magic?"

"Muggles don't need magic Ron!" Hermione sighed, "They have found other means to do many of the things that we do with magic."

"Why don't you call someone to show him how it works?" Harry suggested from behind Ron, his green eye twinkling madly with amusement.

"Yes," Hermione said, "maybe that will work—..." She was just about to reach into her bag when she froze confused.

Hermione glanced down at the empty bed, as did Ron. The two Magical children fell into complete silence as they stared at the empty mattress dumfounded. Slowly they both looked up at each other before turning around in their seats to look at the place they heard Harry's voice.

Harry raised an eyebrow, "I was wondering how long it would take you to realize you walked right past me." Hermione and Ron blushed in embarrassment, "I fear if I hadn't actually interrupted you're argument I would have been sitting here for a good hour. As entertained as I am at your lack of awareness to your surroundings...an hour is quite a long time to be ignored." Harry smiled at his friends and Hermione jumped from her chair noticing his bare arms.

"Your arms!" She exclaimed shocked.

Harry brought his right arm up and glanced at Hermione feigning blank curiosity, "What, have they changed color?"

"No you idiot they're--!" Hermione apparently caught on to the fact that Harry was teasing her as she stalked over to him and latched onto him, "You jerk!" She cried but she was smiling and laughing as she said so.

She took his hands in her own inspecting the fingers and grinning as widely as he was. Ron looked over her shoulder and was frowning as he stared at Harry's blemished skin.

"Why...all of the scars?" Ron asked carefully.

Harry grimaced and Hermione laughed harshly, "Scars?" She cried, "These scars are the most beautiful things I've ever seen!"

Harry and Ron looked at her shocked and she stared at the boys still holding on to Harry's blessedly normal fingers.

"You didn't see him Ron," She looked at Harry, "You probably hadn't even truly seen yourself! I thought...you didn't look human Harry! These arms..." She held his hands up as though trying to show them the image from her memory, "They didn't look like arms anymore!"

"I know," Harry smiled as he stared at the fingers that were intertwined with Hermione's fingers, "It's the most amazing thing...I never dreamed...after what they did to me I couldn't use them properly. I thought I had lost my hands for sure."

Ron was silent as Harry looked at him and grinned, "Yeah, so the scars aren't pretty...but I'd take a multitude of thin scars over what I had to deal with any day.

Both Hermione and Harry watched for Ron's reaction. At first the red-head looked troubled but then a slow grin began to spread across his face and he clapped Harry on the shoulder.

"I hear ladies like the whole rugged-scarred type." Harry laughed and Hermione frowned hitting Ron on the shoulder.

"Is that the only thing you're going to say?" She asked furiously.

Harry placed his left hand on Hermione's shoulder gasping between bouts of laughter, "Hermione, leave it." He laughed, "I think Ron's taking this rather well!"

Hermione smiled slightly and then joined the boys as they talked about all of the pros and cons of Harry's "new" appearance.

The other Weasleys took in Harry's scarred skin with a bit more class than Ron had. Although he did get a tearful hug from Mrs. Weasley, the red-headed family generally took his bare arms to mean that his healing was going well. Harry admired their ability to see good in everything and decided to take a leaf out of their book. So for the next couple of days he worked tirelessly at his physical therapy and Occlumency exorcizes with a positive mind-set. He found that even though he was a bit sore at the end of the day he allowed himself to feel a great sense of accomplishment.

His arms vast improvement helped remind Harry that he was indeed healing, even if at times it felt like he wasn't making any process. It was nice to have people who cared for him constantly around him helping him out when he needed it. The twins kept telling him not to get used to their kindness, but Harry just grinned as they wheeled him around the hospital and caused all sorts of mischief.

Dumbledore came again to help Harry with Occlumency and was surprised to find Hermione, Ron and Harry in a quiet state of Meditation together. He broke them out of their calm state by exclaiming that it seemed he now had three pupils to deal with instead of one and that he was getting too old for these kind of surprises. Harry had noticed the old man's eyes twinkling with amusement and knew his Headmaster had known before walking into the room that Hermione and Ron were studying Occlumency with him. Harry was convinced the old man had counted on the other two participating when he had given Harry the Occlumency book.

After Dumbledore left the trio with new directions to practice Harry shook his head bemused, "Dose he know everything?"

Ron nodded, "Yep," He stated, "it's a fact I accepted after first year when he appeared in the Devils Snare chamber to help Hermione and me while you fought off Quirmort."

"Quirmort?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Yeah, you know," He gestured lazily in the air, "Quirrel plus Voldemort...Quirmort."

Hermione coughed but it sounded to Harry that she was trying to suppress laughter as Harry looked at Ron in bemusement.

Ron looked personally affronted and felt the need to defend himself, "Well I can't just call him 'Quirrel' now can I? He wasn't exactly one person!"

"No!" Hermione laughed, "It's just...that was the most thought out thing you've ever said!"

"What?!" Ron cried, "It was not!"

Harry laughed as Ron and Hermione began to argue again, their argument loosing momentum as they continued to bicker. Soon all three of them were trying to make up inventive ways to botch-up Voldemort's name. Hermione was laying on the left side of Harry's bed her head on his shoulder as she giggled uncontrollably at Ron's newest invention "Lord Ripple". Ron was sitting on Harry's other side with his feet hanging off the side and his body leaning his weight on his right hand placed next to Harry's waist.

Harry laughed, "'Lord Timmy Ripple, The Half-Blood Wonder of the Inbred!"

Hermione laughed uproariously, "The 'Inbred'!" She grinned, "I'd love to see Wittle Draco's face when we tell him!"

Ron gave Harry a High five and bowed to the other two, "Thank you, thank you...I'll be here all week."

"Poor little Timmy..." Harry mock frowned, "I guess God only blesses the muggleborns."

Hermione laughed, "Yeah but I don't think Tiny Timmy is at all worried about that." She smirked at Harry, "I'm sure his father would be ashamed."

Ron looked at the two of them confused, "But I thought Ripple's father was dead."

Hermione and Harry shared a 'look' before bursting out in laughter and trying to explain the story "A Christmas Carol" to Ron. Before

long Ron was laughing at the ironic humor with the other two. As dinner rolled in Hermione's Parents came in and treated the three to a home-made stew that they'd carted over from Home. Hermione and Harry explained their new joke to the elder Grangers and the two adults smiled in good humor at the strange connection the children had made with the Wizard tyrant.

After the adult Grangers left, Harry, Hermione, and Ron, set up a game of cards that ran until the two healthy teenagers were kicked out. Harry grinned as he watched them go and as he closed his eyes he thought of the large wall in his mind with a large neon sign proclaiming "This Mind is Ripple-Proof: That means you Timmy" placed boldly across the front.

Harry was proud to say that night that Tom Riddle's efforts to get past Harry's wards didn't bother him at all. In fact he smiled as he felt the Dark Lord's pause when he noticed Harry's colorful sign placed just behind Dumbledore's Ward in highly visible neon-green letters.

Step One

"All right Mr. Evans," The Muggle Doctor stated carefully as he fingered his glasses, "Are you ready?"

Harry sat, with his hands placed squarely on the handles of the walker that had been placed in front of his wheel chair. Ron and Hermione stood to either side of him, The Weasleys and Grangers sat in various places around the empty room watching him silently. Two other Healers stood behind Ron and Hermione fingering their wands as they watched Harry owlshly.

Harry looked up at the Muggle Doctor with a determined expression plastered to his face. His green eye blazed and his bare, scared feet twitched in anticipation.

"I'm ready." He stated.

"Now don't be too put-out if your legs can't yet bare the weight of your body," The Muggle Doctor warned, "Technically," He frowned at the cheeky Healers behind Harry, "You shouldn't even be able to bend your legs as you are now let alone stand...but I have been over ruled by the other...doctors." He glanced at the Healers and they gave him a strained smile back.

Harry had a feeling that the Healers had put more of their magic in him then usual simply so that they could get out of the Muggle hospital and back to St. Mungos with the rest of they're kind.

"So," The Muggle Doctor continued, "If you're going to stand then take your time, we don't want to have you strain the legs too much and have to put you through surgery again."

Harry nodded and looked at his hands where they rested on the handles of the walker. He closed his eyes and took a deep, calming breath, steeling himself mentally before tensing and placing most of

his weight on his arms. Slowly he lifted himself out of his chair breathing out as he did so. Then just as slowly as he stood he placed all of his weight on his legs and found himself surprised.

The pain was much more minimal then he'd expected it to be and he smiled as he realized that the first time in nearly a month he was standing. He grinned at Hermione and Ron, then at the general populace of the room and carefully lifted his right foot.

"Mr. Evans!" The healer's and Doctors cried as he took his first step successfully.

He moved his left foot to stand with his feet together and took his hands off of the walker for three seconds before the pain caught up with him and he clapped his hands back onto the metal bars. Cheers from various Weasleys and Hermione sprang up as he grinned at his surrogate families as he slowly lowered himself back into the wheel chair. The Healers and Doctors frowned at his unauthorized step and Harry smirked at the discomfort of the Muggle Doctors.

"Well then," The Muggle doctor strained a smile as the Weasley boys quieted, "Congratulations on taking your first step." He grudgingly looked at the Healers and sighed, "And good job mending the boy...In all my years in medicine I have never seen such a quick recovery."

The Healers grinned at each other and extended their hands in professional acknowledgment, "Actually Doctor," Harry's main Healer commended, "Never have I seen such excellent work in mending a broken bone. Working with you has taught me a few useful things that I am afraid to admit I overlooked as being barbaric."

The Doctor and Medi-Witch smiled at each other and shook hands before turning to the grinning assembled Witches, Wizards, and Muggles.

"Now that we know you're able to stand your therapist will be working with you on learning how to walk again." She held up her clip board and nodded to Harry, "That is all for now, Healer Jenkins will be in at two to begin you're new Physical Therapy exercises."

The witch turned to the Doctor and the two nodded to Harry bidding the room good day before exiting with their respective helpers. Harry looked around at the assembled friends around him and grinned as they surged toward him hugging and congratulating him on his first step since the surgery. Then Fred and George surprised Harry as they pulled out their wands decorating the room with bright reds and golds. They made cool golden sparks fall from the ceiling and transfigured the unused bed sheets into banners that proclaimed, "Congratulations", and "Happy Birth Day Harry".

Harry looked at the "Happy Birth Day" banners startled; he had forgotten the date was July 31st, which meant the start of term at Hogwarts was rapidly approaching. Harry didn't really know if he wanted to go back to school that year. He wasn't sure if he wanted to face the Quiddich pitch and what that now represented for him. Nor did he want to face the other students with their pointing and stares. Harry especially didn't want to face the rest of Slytherin house as he now had more reason then ever to mistrust and despise the house of the snake. Harry had probably faced more then half of those student's parents over that summer and he'd even killed a few of them. He definitely didn't want to deal with future Death Eaters who had a taste for vengeance.

A soft hand on his shoulder and two pairs of questioning eyes brought Harry out of his stupor as he noticed Hermione and Ron staring at him in askance. Harry smiled sheepishly as he noticed the rest of the room's occupants' eyes on him as well. He carefully avoided the questioning gazes and looked up at the sparkling gold that was falling steadily down from the ceiling in an affect that reminded Harry of snow.

He grinned up at the ceiling and stated seriously, "I'd forgotten it was my birthday."

Laughter reached Harry's ears at his answer as his Surrogate family teased him for his slip of memory. The party truly got underway after that. The Weasley Twins outdid themselves when they presented Harry with their gift. It was the most amusing Gift Harry had ever gotten considering the circumstances and although the Weasley Matriarch disapproved of it Harry felt truly grateful that the twins had put such thought in the gift. The Gift itself was a plastic candle lighter in the shape of a wand. When Harry swished the contraption a small flame sparked out of the end of the stick with a pop and a mechanical voice cried out "abracadabra"!

Harry had taken one look at the flame and after a few seconds of tense silence he burst into laughter. The wand was a Muggle toy from a Party shop in the village near the Weasley's home. The twins said they had bought it one year during Halloween when they were younger and had never known quite what to do with it. They had decided that with Harry's predicament it seemed like an appropriate gift. Harry had agreed heartily and told the twins that he'd treasure his "new wand".

From Mrs. Weasley he received a hand-nit quilt that he thanked her profusely for. From Ginny he got a small wooden snitch that she had charmed herself to hover around Harry always just out of his reach. She hoped that while it wasn't a real snitch it would at least entertain him while he was stuck in the hospital bed. Harry had thanked her profusely and allowed the snitch to hover around his bed while he opened his other presents.

From the Grangers Harry got a full hygiene kit, to which Harry was extremely grateful for. He hadn't been able to really clean himself for months and Harry had missed simple things like tooth brushes and combs while he had been on the run. It was really amazing how of all the things he had truly missed while hiding on the streets was a good

bath and clean teeth. So he thanked the Grangers and received Bill's gift.

Bill gave Harry a very peculiar object. It was a small pewter necklace with a copper phoenix charm attached. When Harry asked why a phoenix Bill had stated there was more to that phoenix than met the eye. Woven into the finely detailed metal work was a ward that Bill had placed upon it, a ward that would hinder and even slow down any hex that was thrown at Harry. Harry had looked at Bill surprised and thankful. He put the necklace on slowly and grinned at the curse breaker.

Charlie's gift was just as useful as Bill's. His Gift was a black Dragon Hide cloak. The dragon hide was impervious to most magic and it was flexible and light allowing Harry free reign of movement. As an added bonus the cloak looked closer to a Muggle trench than a wizard's cloak so Harry could wear it virtually anywhere and blend in without much notice. Both Bill and Charlie figured that Harry needed the extra protection their gifts provided as he seemed to attract more trouble than he should.

Harry thanked both of them reverently feeling the rough and smooth material of his new cloak knowing that both their gifts had cost a pretty penny or two. He could also feel a subtle protection magic woven into the fabric of the black material and smiled slightly as another unknown, wild, magic touched his fingers. Harry decided he'd have to investigate that magic further at a later date, so he placed the dragon hide aside and gave Ron his undivided attention.

Ron's gift was the most simple out of the bunch, but Harry loved it almost more than any gift he'd received so far. It was a roast beef sandwich with coleslaw and mayonnaise. Harry's eyes and mouth began watering as he un-wrapped the small gift. He had been complaining to Ron and Hermione that the one food he missed most was a simple roast-beef sandwich. Harry looked at Ron and wordlessly flung an arm out. The two surrogate brothers gave each

other a one armed hug in quiet understanding. Harry remembered how it had been an unwanted sandwich and half the food on a trolley that really first formed their friendship on the train that first year. How fitting it was that Ron gifted Harry with the very same type of sandwich that had helped the two become friends.

Hermione's gift was a single candle. When Harry looked at her in askance she smiled.

"You'll be needing to learn how to control you're rather explosive new ability Harry," She explained, "I felt that perhaps a candle might help. I have theories on what to do and will go over them with you when you're ready."

Harry nodded and hugged Hermione gratefully. No less than four times within the past month in the hospital Harry had accidentally caused some object or another to spontaneously combust. Hermione had been scouring books for weeks trying to figure out how she could help him control his pyromaniac abilities.

After Harry was finished eating the sandwich Ron had given him and just as they were about to bring out the cake Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Granger had made together...the door opened to allow an old wizard dressed in outlandishly bright orange robes and a large black shaggy dog. The dog wasted no time bounding across the room to jump onto Harry's bed and lick his face excitedly in greeting.

"Snuffles!" Harry, Ron, and Hermione grinned broadly as Dumbledore, the wizard who had just entered, closed and locked the door.

"Mrs. Weasley if you would be so kind as to make this room impenetrable to outside ears...?" Dumbledore intoned gently as he closed Harry's blinds and placed a stasis charm on the fabric, "Then our dear, 'Snuffles', can greet his God Son in a less...slobery manner."

Harry grinned as the shaggy black dog jumped off of the bed and morphed into a tall man with black hair and wild grey eyes. He bowed to those present as Mr. and Mrs. Granger clapped in awe at his animagus ability.

The twins grinned at each other, "Do you think he's happy to be out?" Fred asked his twin.

"Why certainly." The dog-turned-man smirked, "Anyone would be happy to be free of the stink of a centuries worth of accumulation of house elf dung." He winked at Hermione as she glowered at him darkly.

Molly Weasley frowned as she noticed Harry's confused look, "Now Mr. Black," She admonished, "Harry isn't aware that you have been in London for a time, and really," She shot her identical boys a scowl, "We shouldn't be talking about this here."

Harry looked at his god father with sudden suspicion, "Sirius?" He asked, "What are we not supposed to be talking about here?"

Sirius grinned honestly at Harry, "Later pup." He placed both of his hands on Harry's shoulders and took a good long look at him, "Just let me look at you and allow myself to believe this is real."

Harry smiled at his godfather feeling the truth in his words and memorizing the heavy feel of his aura just as he had done to every other person in the room. He was surprised and sort of glad when Sirius pulled Harry to him in a crushing hug.

"I searched all over for you." He stated vehemently, "I scoured the country side hoping that I'd catch even the slightest scent that would tell me you were alive somewhere." Harry was amazed when he felt a hot tear land on his cheek and he realized Sirius was crying, "Then I found a bloodied mass of torn clothing riddled with your scent and

feared—Merlin I thought I'd failed you!" He pulled back to stare Harry in the eye, "It was just as if I'd failed Lilly and James for the second time!"

"You searched for me?" Harry asked quietly, "When you knew that you could get caught and sent back to Azkaban?"

"Of course I did Pup." Sirius stated, "Remus did too. What else could we do? I wasn't going to loose you to those bastards, not again."

Harry nodded then pulled his God father back into a tight embrace. He remembered all of the bloodied and torn clothing he'd abandoned in countless places while he ran. He'd never bothered to find a trash can, that would have taken too much time, and the stiff clothes had always slowed him down. So he'd abandon the fabrics when he got a hold of some newer articles of clothing, (often stolen). If Sirius had stumbled upon one of his abandoned piles then he had probably just missed Harry. It was a frightening thought, that if Harry had just stayed put a little while longer, Sirius would have found him and Harry would have been home a lot earlier then he was. No wonder Sirius was crying, Harry almost felt like crying as well.

After a moment where both males simply relished in the feel of being together again Sirius pulled away.

"Remus was trying to help too?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Sirius smiled, "He went around the wolf circles asking if any of the packs had seen or smelt you. Most turned him away while others warned him that if they did see you their orders were to bite you." Harry shuddered.

"You can only imagine how frantic Moony was after he heard that." Sirius stated seriously and glanced at Dumbledore, "There's a lot the Wizarding world needs to do before all of the werewolves join Old Snake face."

Harry smirked at Ron and Hermione and the two filed that nick name away for later use.

"Oh please!" A small voice startled everyone out of the grim topic they were delving into, "Right now," Ginny stated, her hands on her hips in a manner that reminded Harry far too much of the Weasley Patriarch, "Is not the time to be discussing what was and what will be! It's Harry's fifteenth birthday! Let's just celebrate that and be happy by the fact that he is here. With us. Alive!" Harry smiled at the short red-head gratefully as she turned her ire onto Sirius, "Now did you bring him a bleeding present or didn't you?"

Harry laughed at Ginny's statement as Sirius wordlessly drew out a long thin object wrapped messily in news paper and handed it to the diminutive red-head. Ginny nodded approvingly at Sirius and shoved the tall object into Harry's hands while everyone present laughed.

The object was heavier then Harry had expected and it felt smooth and round beneath the wrapping. Harry's sensitive fingers could feel strong magic beneath the paper and Harry searched the feeling looking for any taints in its signature.

"Well are you reading the tabloids or are you going to open the bloody parcel?" One of the twins, (Harry suspected it was George), shouted eliciting some small laughter. Harry grinned and glanced up at his now eager Godfather. He grabbed one end of the paper and slowly began to rip it off the present. Harry laughed as Ron, Fred, George, and Sirius groaned. Hermione and Ginny shared a smirk and the two parental units rolled their eyes at their children's dramatic antics. When Harry glanced at Dumbledore to gage his reaction the old man was silently sporting his usual infuriating twinkle. So Harry gave up trying to get a rise out the others and simply tore the rest of the paper off.

Harry stared in awe at the smooth black object he now held. It was a

cane, a beautiful, black ivory cane. Inlaid in its length were obsidian checkers and a foot from each end of the cane were red rings of stone that Hermione identified as being Ruby. The top and bottom of the cane had a hand length of the same Ruby stone. The shape of the cane was deceptively simple and really, the obsidian blended in with the black ivory so well that Harry was sure no one would notice the small checkers of stone without looking at it closely. The top of the cane was rounded so that it fit perfectly against the palm of his hand and the end was rounded similarly so that it would move easier when Harry walked.

Harry stared at his godfather astounded, "Sirius—this—this is..."

"My Great, great, great uncle's twice removed." Sirius answered, "He's been dead for two centuries and he was one of my more...respectable ancestors, which means he is no longer associated with the Black family line." Sirius grinned, "He is most well known for excluding his entire family of Blacks in his fortune and magic when he died. Instead he gave all of his fortune and magic and divided it amongst the Muggle serfs and farmers that lived and worked his land. One of those serfs was his own personal Potter, whose son married a daughter of the Gryffindor family line and went on to become the prominent Wizarding family 'Potter'. You're ancestors, Harry."

Harry stared at the Cane with respect; the artifact was incredibly old and held history with his own family.

"It is also," Sirius continued, "The only object left of his fortune that the Blacks were able to detain. I think he allowed them to take it because no one but him knew how to unleash its full potential."

"Potential?" Harry asked curious, "It's just a cane right?"

Sirius shrugged, "Who knows." He grinned at his Godson, "I just figured that you'll be able to use it if for nothing else then to help you

walk. I believe the myth of the cane's potential was created because it was the only thing the man left to his extremely bitter family."

"Thank you Sirius." Harry smiled sincerely, "Merlin knows I'll need all the help with walking I can get right now."

Sirius grinned and Hermione clapped her hand on Harry's shoulder, "That won't be true for long," Hermione smiled, "You'll get used to walking again soon."

Harry smirked, "Not with you and Ron helping me I won't."

She smacked Harry up the back side of his head lightly.

"Ow!" Harry mock cried, "Hitting the injured Hermione? How could you?"

"Oh please," Hermione rolled her eyes and glanced at the grinning Twins, "You've been around the terrible twos too much lately. You're starting to pick up their habits."

"And that's a bad thing?" Ron asked.

Hermione hit him too. The twins were laughing uproariously and Sirius was grinning and giving Ron and Harry pointers on how best to irk Hermione. Much to her horror.

As they ate cake Dumbledore presented Harry with a small crystal ball for his birthday. He stated it will help Harry focus, (with a very pointed look at Hermione and Ron), and then congratulated Harry on taking his first step earlier that day.

For the rest of the evening Harry's guests sat around talking and laughing. They swapped tales of earlier years together and became that much closer as the sun fell. When outside was dark Dumbledore and Sirius bid Harry goodbye. Sirius promised to send him a letter

explaining where he was and what he'd been involved in. He said this with a frighteningly familiar twinkle in his eyes and Harry wondered if he should worry for his next letter.

Hermione, Ron, the Twins, and Ginny stayed after their parents and elder siblings left. They pulled all four of the beds together and charmed the crystal ball Harry had been given to look as though a flame were burning inside of it. Harry wasn't sure that the use of the crystal was what Dumbledore had wished for Harry to do but he was sure the old man wouldn't mind. Then they told ghost stories that made Harry roll around in his bed with laughter. The horrors of those stories were ridiculous compared to the horror Harry had faced in real life.

The six of them had a pillow fight and played other silly games before all of them fell asleep in the middle of the line of beds. As Harry fell asleep in the middle of red heads and one bushy brown he felt that it didn't matter that maybe that moment was what a home should feel like. As Harry had never had a true home he felt, lying directly between Ron and Hermione, as though that moment...hanging on the edge sleep, his head feeling light and his body heavy...That was it.

The past four months were a closing chapter for Harry. A long, frightening, nightmarish chapter that was finally beginning to end. It was a peaceful revelation. Ever since he had ended up on the doorstep of Hermione's home he'd felt this encompassing peace stirring in the bowls of his stomach. And as he lay watching the shadows from the charmed fire flicker across the ceiling he felt that maybe, he was accepting the past four months and that he was making his peace with them.

Healing was a strange thing, Harry decided. The scars were there, the memories were always there. Yet they weren't as intense, they weren't as raw. They were no longer bleeding, but they still gave off a dull throb. His experiences had taught him lessons of survival that

Harry was not yet ready to review though he was willing to accept it...and why? Shouldn't he be a mental wreck? Shouldn't he flinch at every touch or shy away from every gaze? Shouldn't Harry want to be alone? Away from the people who love him?

Somehow he knew this healing was because of the love of the people around him. He knew within him that it was the also in part the love protection of his mother, even though Voldemort had violated that love. A small smile graced Harry's lips as he watched the orange shadows dance upon the ceiling and listened to the even breathing and occasional snoring of his friends. He felt old...and somehow incredibly young at the same time. He wanted to memorize the feeling of lying there between his loved ones. He wanted to immortalize it within his mind and never let it go.

Movement to his right Caused Harry to look at the frizzy strands of the girl beside him as she blearily opened her chocolate eyes to look at him.

"Harry?" She whispered quietly, her eyes searching his green iris for answers to a question only she knew.

Harry was surprised when he felt her wild magic gently touch his own almost instinctually. He smiled at the girl wondering if he'd ever not be surprised by the clever witch and lifted his arm invitingly. She immediately shifted closer to him resting her curly head on his shoulder.

"Are you ok?" She asked closing her eyes.

He caulked his head to the side as he stared up at the ceiling pondering her question. It was the first time in his entire stay in the hospital that she had physically asked the question and Harry wondered what she was referring to.

A gentle poke in the ribs told him he was taking too long to answer

her and he turned his head in order to see her properly before smiling contentedly.

"Yeah," He calmly whispered back, "I'm good." His voice had a whimsical sound to it and he wondered if Hermione believed or even accepted his answer.

She must have been too tired, Harry decided, because she accepted his answer without argument and snuggled closer to him and fell back asleep. Harry decided to take Hermione's example and fall asleep as well. As was becoming common, Harry fell asleep with a smile.

Irony is a God

"Harry!"

Harry awoke, unaware he had been screaming until he fell onto the bed with a decisive 'thwump'! The Nurse was staring at him with wide eyes and more than a small amount of fear. The Healer was frowning at him behind the terrified woman's back. Hermione and Ron stood to either side of Harry's bed, their faces white with worry. The other beds had been moved back to the places they belonged and Harry saw no sign of any other red-heads in the room.

Harry winced and gingerly shifted his bum into a more comfortable position. The mattresses on the hospital beds were not the thickest mattresses in the world and he was sure that they had never been made for falling on them. Harry looked up at the ceiling and frowned as the nurses carefully approached him. They were walking towards him as if he was going to go berserk and attack them. The two Muggles walked carefully and slowly with their hands held out in front of them as though Harry were going to leap at them if provoked.

A small twitch began to form at Harry's left eye-brow...he had half a mind to jump at them just to see what they would do with how cautious they were acting. The question that was nagging at Harry was why? Why were they acting like this towards him? Why were Ron and Hermione looking at him like that?

Then there was the how: as in how did Harry end up in the air in the first place? He'd never had an experience quite like waking up several feet above his own bed. Quite frankly Harry didn't have clue as to how it was possible for a Human being to float in the air without some type of conscious spell or help.

Harry looked down at his lap confused and flinched at what he saw. The first thing he noticed was that the bed beneath him was charred black. The second thing Harry noticed were the black slashes in his

hospital gown and...Harry lifted the gown to investigate his assumption. The bandages that remained around his torso were cut and black in the same fashion as his hospital gown. Harry also noticed that he and the bed were completely soaked. Harry had a suspicion that the frowning Healer behind Ron and Hermione was the one responsible for dousing him so thoroughly. Her wand was still pointed decisively at him.

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione in askance now completely bewildered even though a quiet suspicion was building at the edge of his mind.

"Harry?" Ron asked carefully.

Harry resisted the urge to shout "boo" at his best mate as Ron stared at Harry so cautiously.

"Ron." Harry stated he looked at Hermione's own white features, "Do I even want to know?" He asked her as he pushed his sopping long black bangs off of his face.

"Well," Hermione looked at Ron nervously, "We left the room for a moment, to get some breakfast..." She gestured absently to a white bag that Harry assumed was where Hermione and Ron's breakfast was, "And when we came back..."

"You were floating about three feet above your bed." Ron supplied.

"And you were...burning." Hermione finished.

"Burning." Harry deadpanned, his suspicions being confirmed at their affirmative nods.

Harry sighed and glanced at the Healer who was still pointing her wand at him, "I have a very distinct feeling, madam," He nodded at her acknowledging the wand, "that I am not going to spontaneously

burst into flame again for a while." Harry pulled at the black rags that had previously made up his bandages and his hospital robe, "I have a hunch that I've...burned myself out well enough all ready."

The Healer frowned but lowered her wand just the same.

"Harry," Hermione pressed, "You were also screaming. A lot." Her eyes were carefully glued to his face to gage his reaction and Harry shrugged.

"I was having a difficult dream." He stated non-pulsed.

"A difficult dream," Ron stated frowning, "Right."

"I was!" Harry defended as the two traumatized Muggle nurses finally approached him and touched him gingerly.

Harry worried that a simple memory charm might not be enough to help them after he'd left.

"A difficult dream doesn't create such a response from the recipient Harry." Hermione frowned.

Her shock was beginning to wear off and her ire at his easy explanation was beginning to replace her earlier fear.

"Only a truly traumatizing memory could elicit such a reaction!" Hermione explained to him her hands going to her hips in agitation.

"Hence the term 'difficult'." Harry agreed, "I guess it was a rather disturbing memory."

Both Ron and Hermione's jaws had dropped open in disbelief. They couldn't possibly understand how Harry was being so calm about a memory that would cause his magic to react so violently. Their quickly growing ire was turning into worry for their friend's mental

state. Harry noticed the looks on their faces and the feel of their auras and winced. He really didn't want to deal with Hermione and Ron treating him as though he were about to break; and he especially didn't want them watching his every move as though he were walking on panes of broken glass. He was sure that he was going to receive that reaction by the rest of the Wizarding population once he was pronounced alive publicly. He didn't want such behavior from his best friends.

"Look," Harry held out his arms, "I'm alive, I'm healing, and I am more or less accepting what I have been through as something that has happened to me. I'm not saying what happened to me was all happiness and flowers but I am saying that I can deal with it. End of story."

"But Harry," Hermione carefully stated, unaware that the nurses were literally undressing Harry in front of her and Ron, "You haven't talked about any of what happened, well not really, you've hinted a lot but you've never really sat down and talked about it!"

"It's not healthy." Ron added, "Obviously your dreams are trying to express this to you."

Both Hermione and Harry stared at Ron in shock.

Ron stared back and fidgeted under their incredulous stares and looked at the floor his ears turning red in embarrassment, "What?" He asked meekly, "I overheard the adults talking about it once."

"Oooohhh..." Harry and Hermione intoned together.

"I thought Ron had been temporarily replaced by an Alien or something," Harry smirked as Ron frowned.

"Yeah I—wait." Hermione looked at Harry bemused, "An Alien Harry?"

Harry shrugged, "Yeah, there are Witches and Wizards, so why not Aliens?"

"Harry," Hermione cried exasperated, "There's no proof! Not to mention if there was life outside of our own world wouldn't we have known about it by now?"

"Of course not." Harry answered sagely, "Our technology, magic or otherwise, isn't near advanced enough yet."

"What?" Hermione stared at Harry incredulous, "Not advanced enough--?"

"Hermione." Ron interrupted, "I think we need to leave the room for a few minutes."

"What--why?" Hermione asked angrily and then looked at Harry more closely... "Oh." She stated with wide eyes.

Harry found himself taking far too much pleasure in watching a rosy pink blossom over Hermione's flushed cheeks as she realized that Harry was quite literally being 'de-robed' in front of her. He glanced at the Healer and the nurses who had all stopped what they were doing to watch her grow redder by the second. He had a feeling they hadn't shooed Hermione and Ron out just to see their reaction. A quick glance in Ron's direction confirmed Harry's assumption that he was just as amused as Harry was.

"Um..." Hermione determinedly kept her eyes glued to Harry's face much to the scarred boy's amusement, "Well, I guess Ron and I will be outside until you are...finished."

"Ok." Harry chirped.

Ron burst out laughing as Hermione dragged him out of the room her

face a flame in embarrassment. Harry counted to ten in his head and grinned as a cry of outrage filtered through the door as Hermione realized he had thoroughly distracted her from the topic of his dream. The Healer checked something off of her clip board and muttered under her breath. Apparently she now owed the Muggle doctor the equivalent of ten pounds in Wizarding coins.

"Just ten more minutes and I would have won," she explained to the increasingly amused Harry, "If Mr. Weasley had kept his mouth shut for just ten more minutes..."

Harry laughed.

A week after Harry had awoken soaked to the bone the nurses still walked around Harry nervously over the next few days and the Boy-Who-Lived was beginning to get rather irritated by it. He only got reprieve from their strange behavior when the Physical therapist came in to help him work. They were both becoming rather frustrated by Harry's lack of progress when it came to walking. It wasn't that it was too painful for Harry to bare his own weight...it was that Harry's legs just didn't want to bend properly!

The physical therapist told Harry that with how quickly he had recovered from everything else it was only to be expected that one thing might take longer to catch up. In Harry's case that something was walking. Harry had sighed and accepted that it may be a long while before he could walk on his own yet. A small voice in the back of Harry's thoughts feared that Harry may never be able to walk properly again. After all he had been walking on two broken legs for over three months before the bones had a chance to heal. It would be a miracle if Harry didn't have any permanent eternal damage. It was probably too much to ask for Harry's legs to ever truly recover.

Harry forcibly pushed the negative voice out of his head. Harry was of the opinion that his thoughts influenced his healing and he was determined to keep a positive outlook.

Yet after two weeks of no progress and the date of Harry's fifth year nearing closer every second...That positive outlook that Harry clung to was beginning to waver. His dreams were starting to become worse and on more than one occasion Harry wasn't able to clear his mind enough to meditate and do his Occlumency exercises correctly. Hermione and Ron kept his days entertained and the trio had great fun trying to capture Ginny's wooden snitch that always seemed just out of reach. Harry likened the home-made toy to his walking ability, or lack thereof.

Finally as August approached and Harry was in a fairly foul mood Dumbledore, Sirius, and Remus came into the hospital room to discuss Harry's next school year as well as what was occurring on the outside. It was then Harry learned about a group called, "The Order of the Phoenix" and that Sirius's house was the head quarters. Dumbledore and Sirius had hoped to move Harry into the headquarters but realized that Harry wasn't nearly ready to do so in his current state. This upset Harry further and he let his frustrations and fears be known.

Sirius held his God son as the fifteen year old ranted and sobbed terrified that he may never walk again. He was scared about what would happen to him once he left the Hospital. Harry was frightened that he would never be well enough to go back to school and then he was scared of going back to school. He was afraid of his new pyro abilities and he was worried about how he was going to execute spells without his wand.

He stared at the three men he had always viewed as his mentors and the two best friends that were constantly by his side and shook in Sirius's arms. Never in his life had Harry felt more exposed or more like the child he actually was in that moment. He was terrified of that feeling as well especially as he confessed that his nightmares were getting worse and that he could feel the ward Dumbledore had placed around his mind beginning to weaken. He couldn't look Ron

or Hermione in the eyes as Dumbledore explained to them what that meant.

Sirius simply responded to the news by pulling his Godson closer to him as though his very presence could protect him. Hermione nodded as though Dumbledore's explanation was the answer to the questions she had been silently asking for weeks. Remus seemed worried but was otherwise silent and Ron...?

Ron seemed to be going through conflicting emotions on the issue and seemed to be bursting with the need to have some answers. Harry sighed and pushed himself away from Sirius composing himself and wiping his eyes. He looked at Ron and flinched when his brother looked away before determinedly staring Harry in the face.

"Do you understand?" Harry asked quietly.

Ron was silent for a moment, gathering his thoughts before answering, "Not really," He finally said, "It sounds sort of like Voldemort is inside of you...like he can influence you?"

Harry nodded gravely, "That could be true...He and I are linked." He stated, "It happened when he cast the curse that should have killed me and it was finalized when he took my blood to resurrect himself." He looked at Dumbledore nervously, "At least that's how I perceive it."

"That's why Dumbledore gave you the Occlumency book," Hermione confirmed.

"Yes," Harry said quietly, "It was to protect my thoughts from Voldemort and so that he wouldn't influence them." He looked up at Ron, "This is how Voldemort always knew where I was and how I know what he feels and sees." Harry shuddered, "Whether I want to see what he does or not. That's why we've been learning Occlumency...why I need to learn Occlumency."

Ron looked at his hands and Harry knew that the knowledge that Ron's his best friend could be controlled by a mad man was a frightening concept. Harry knew Ron may never look at his scar quite the same way anymore, nor would he see Harry as the same person he always had. Harry bowed his head feeling truly defeated for the first time since the last task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

He was startled when Ron grabbed both of Harry's shoulders and stared into Harry's green eye.

"So," Ron stated surprising Harry with a look of determination Harry never expected from the red head, "We're going to have to work harder on getting those bloody exercises right in that book huh? Meaning more studying right?"

Harry was too shocked to answer Ron; instead he pulled the taller boy into a fierce hug and closed his eyes relieved beyond measure. Hermione joined the boys and grinned.

"Don't worry Harry," She smiled, "We'll make sure Little Timmy Ripple can't tease you anymore."

Harry and Ron laughed, more out of mutual relief then amusement. Sirius and Remus shared a look, their eyes remembering another time with another three children telling each other they'd always be there when one of their dark secrets had been revealed. It had been Sirius whom Remus had not fully trusted to accept him during that time and it was also Sirius who had been the one to accept Remus's furry little problem with the most conviction.

Dumbledore waited until both parties were finished with their Hallmark moments before reminding them all about the main problem at hand.

"Harry," He stated, "Even if you have to stay here another two

months in order to recover you will still be accepted back at school."

Harry nodded, "But what about the reaction of the other students when they learn I'm still alive?" He ran a hand through his hair agitated, "And what about the various Slytherins that will want me dead? Or more specifically the Head of the Snake's house?" He glowered at the headmaster, "I will not step into a room with him without you or another adult I trust." He snarled.

"Now Harry—." Dumbledore tried but was vehemently interrupted.

"No Albus!" Harry growled, "He is a Death Eater! I will not yield!"

Sirius nodded protectively next to his God son and Ron stood next to Harry with his arms crossed. Remus and Hermione shared identical worried looks and Albus just sighed.

"Well," he stated, "You don't need to worry about Severus anyways Harry."

Harry relaxed considerably at Dumbledore's statement.

"I have made arrangements with Professor Sinistra who has agreed to tutor you in Potions when you are ready to come to school." Dumbledore informed.

"Professor Sinistra?" Hermione asked, "Isn't she--?"

"Yes Ms. Granger," Dumbledore smiled at Hermione, "She is the Ancient Runes professor and Astronomy professor at Hogwarts. She is also a Potions master and an expert on wandless techniques from the Far East...among other things."

Hermione allowed her jaw to drop in surprise at this information. Professor Sinistra was a stiff woman with a very strict approach in teaching. She didn't take slacking well and she tended to be brutal to

the students she suspected didn't read the material before class. It took a lot of effort to get the woman to tolerate you and gaining her respect was a rare treat that only Hermione and one other student in the seventh year had the privilege of obtaining.

Yet, once a student gained the attention and then respect of the tough woman Hermione had found that the elder Witch was a fascinating individual with a fountain of down to earth wisdom. Hermione greatly respected the old teacher who often lived up to her name. She looked at Harry suddenly wondering what it would be like to be tutored in potions from the intelligent Witch.

"As it is," Dumbledore continued, "You are going to be here for a while yet still. So I think, for your continued protection you should continue under the alias Evans. We shall see weather or not you continue at school with the name of your birth."

"What would that accomplish at school?" Hermione asked intelligently.

"More than half of the Slytherin student body will know who Harry really is on sight." Remus continued, "I'm sure some of their parents will have notified them about Harry's...appearance."

"No," Said Harry with a sudden smirk, "They will know only of a completely deformed Harry Potter, not a scarred one."

Hermione grinned, "That's right," She smirked at Dumbledore, "I remember how Harry looked before he got here, he didn't look human...They won't expect a normal human...albeit a horribly scarred normal Human."

Dumbledore twinkled, "Are you suggesting I enroll Harry Potter under an alias Ms. Granger?"

Hermione fidgeted, "Well...It did cross my mind..."

"It wouldn't work." Ron spoke shaking his head, "The similarities are still too strong, still too obvious...I mean," He shifted his weight nervously; "It would be too much of a coincidence. Harry Potter proclaimed dead, I new transfer student who has vaguely similar features shows up to take his place?" He looked at everyone, "Doesn't that seem a bit...I don't know...quick?"

Remus nodded, "You're right Ron. It would be far too quick for it to be a coincidence." The old wolf sighed, "I guess the best option is just to bring Harry Potter back from the dead."

"Well then we'll have to break it to the world slowly." Hermione stated her face screwed up in displeasure, "I don't think it'd be a good idea to let them know where he is though..."

"Patience Ms. Granger." Dumbledore smiled, "If we gave them the rumor now that Harry Potter might still be alive out in the world somewhere then that will probably prepare the media for Harry's grand entrance back to life... But, if we send the rumor out now we'd be risking The Dark Lords eyes and preparation for when Harry dose come back."

"Timmy is all ready aware that I'm alive, Albus," Harry argued, "I'm betting he's all ready prepared for the time I walk through the doors at Hogwarts. Timmy's a resourceful little bugger, I'm sure he all ready has a plan for when that day comes. So you might as well let the world hear the rumors...either way their going to find out eventually."

"Well then," Sirius grinned sinisterly, "Well just have to make sure that when you are ready to go back to school...you won't be walking through the entrance...or the back."

"What do you have in mind?" Remus asked suspiciously.

"There are passages Moony, in and out of Hogwarts that only you

and I know..." Sirius's smile grew, "That even the Twins haven't found yet..."

Remus's eyes widened and he began to shake his head, "Oh no," he shook his head more fervently and Sirius's grin grew even wider, "No, no, no, no Sirius!" Remus jumped from his chair waving his arms around angrily, "We are not taking Harry down there! In his state it'd be far too dangerous!"

"Dangerous?" Dumbledore asked serenely, "Which Passages would these be Mr. Black?"

"Oh...you would know them Dumbledore..." Sirius stated adopting an innocent look that no one bought for a second, "After all they carry the weight of the schools foundations on their shoulders..."

"Ah." Dumbledore smiled, "The tombs of the Founders."

"What?" Hermione asked confused, "There's no mention of the Founder's Tombs in Hogwarts: A History..."

"Well there wouldn't be would there?" Sirius asked, "The tombs have to do with the structure of the magic and the wards that make up the very foundations of the school."

"And that is knowledge that should only be privy to the respective Headmaster of the school." Albus Dumbledore admonished.

Remus and Sirius flinched at the calm way Albus reprimanded them. Harry met the old man's eyes and noticed his smile. Harry grinned, he knew that Albus was aware of the marauder's movements when they had been in school and apparently he didn't really mind that Sirius and Remus knew about The Tombs. Now the old man was simply teasing the last of the Marauders and neither of them realized it.

"Well then," Dumbledore smiled, "As I am the current headmaster, I know the safest routes of the tombs and many of its secrets. So I can very easily guide young Harry in and out of the Tomb without much trouble."

Remus and Sirius nodded and the young Trio looked at each other with sudden burning curiosity. All ready their minds were forming questions that just itched to be answered. But apparently those questions would have to wait as Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus turned to other topics.

"I visited with the Dursleys Harry," Dumbledore stated gravely.

Remus surprised Harry by emitting a small growl at the mention of the Dursleys, "I went with him." The wolf explained.

Harry nodded, "And?" He asked carefully, his voice and features guarded of any emotion.

"And considering the circumstances with Voldemort's resurrection..." Dumbledore sighed, "I deemed it unsafe to send you back there."

"Why?" Harry asked, "It's a Muggle neighborhood. There are hundreds of them all over the English Isles. What would cause a Death Eater to look at the Dursley's home in particular?"

The other four occupants of the room stared at Harry blankly and The-Boy-Who-Lived remembered he was the obvious reason for Voldemort to look into the sleepy neighborhood.

The half of his face that wasn't covered flushed crimson in embarrassment, "Oh, right. Me."

"Yeah," Ron stated sarcastically, "You."

Harry flushed a deeper red at his slip and grinned sheepishly,

"Besides that then." He muttered, "Why would the Dursleys be any more of a threat than they have in the past?"

"Any more'?" Hermione asked suspicious.

"Well they were never really safe were they?" Harry shrugged, "They stuck me into a cupboard for more than half my life and threatened me on more than one occasion. I was virtually their house elf and on most weeks I was lucky if I got fed regularly."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose in surprise and Remus and Sirius had stricken looks plastered to their faces. Ron nodded having heard about how the Dursleys treated him on more than one occasion and Hermione frowned beside him.

"Those bastards." Sirius growled.

"My boy," Dumbledore asked concerned the twinkle that usually visited his eyes gone completely, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Harry looked startled at the adults' dark expressions and the silent anger repressed beneath their auras, "Well," Harry said surprised by the various reactions, "I guess it was unpleasant but never anything I thought was strange. I mean," He stated nervously noticing the various expressions darken, "It was normal for me and...I didn't see it as something significant enough to just bring up in normal conversation..."

"Not significant?" Hermione asked surprised, "Harry, that's child abuse!"

"Well yeah!" Harry exclaimed, "I know that now but at the time...it never registered ok?"

"Dumbledore," Sirius growled, "Did you know about this when you sent him there?"

"No." Dumbledore stated gravely, "I had no idea that the Dursleys would treat Harry as anything other than family. If I had known...this changes everything. Harry," Harry felt the truth of the older man's words but he did wonder why Dumbledore would see the Dursleys as fit to take care of a child wizard, "Harry the reason I placed you in the care of the Dursleys was because of your mother's protection. Only a blood relative could continue to uphold that protection as long as said relative loved you as if you were another son."

Harry shook his head bewildered, "But the Dursleys have never loved me. I was a stain on their perfect, normal lives. A freak! I was lower than a dog to them!"

"And yet," Hermione said quietly, "Your mother's protection saved you from Qiremort." Her lip twitched at the use of Ron's nick-name, "Obviously it was upheld in some way."

"It was the strength of Lilly." Sirius said quietly.

Remus smiled and nodded, "Yes, Lilly never did anything in halves. When she used magic it was beautiful." He and Sirius shared soft looks, "If she loved you as we know she did and she prepared some sort of protection for you she would have given her whole being to that protection. That's just the type of woman she was. When she decided to do something, it was all or nothing."

Harry's chest warmed at those words and then he frowned, such beautiful love...and it had been defiled by Little Timmy Ripple. Dumbledore had placed Harry with the Dursleys in hopes that the love of his mother would be transferred in the same way by her sister. Yet when it hadn't his mother's love had been strong enough to survive even her sister's hatred and jealousy.

"Even though you didn't need the protection I had feared you would need...This still changes everything Harry." Dumbledore cut through

his thoughts sadly, "Child abuse is not tolerated in the Wizarding community. It is considered barbaric and magically hindering. It is obvious that the Dursleys are not fit to take care of a child. If you want we can press charges against them and you can gain a new magical guardian."

Harry looked at Dumbledore surprised, "I don't want to press charges." He stated firmly.

"You don't?" Sirius asked incredulously, "Why not?"

"Because they never raised their hand against me," Harry stated matter-of-factly, "And while they did treat me horribly, they could have abandoned me any where at any time or even sent me to a Muggle orphanage when ever they wanted. But they didn't." He looked his godfather in the eyes steadily, "I want to leave them. Merlin, I would give an arm to never see them again, but I would rather leave them in a peaceful manner. I don't want to leave them with a sour taste in my mouth if I can help it."

Harry looked at Dumbledore as Sirius looked away, "With my age and Sirius's status as a fugitive...would it be possible for me to gain an emancipation?"

"Not unless you had a stable income." Remus muttered.

"What about a surrogate family?" Hermione suggested, "He could live with my family or Ron's and one of our parents could become temporary guardians until he's of age or until Sirius's name is cleared."

Sirius snorted, "Unless we catch Pettigrew that isn't going to happen."

"But that is a good idea Hermione." Remus added, "Although I think you're parents would be more apt to doing it."

"Why Hermione's parents?" Ron asked, "He practically lives at The Burrough all ready."

"Forgive me Ron," Remus said quietly, "But I believe it would be easier on you're mother if she didn't have another mouth to feed."

Ron was silent and Harry looked up to defend his friend. He didn't have to as Hermione placed a hand on the red-head's shoulder and looked at Remus.

"If that is the course we are going to take," Hermione admonished quietly, "Then I think it best that Harry and our respective parents talk about it with the three of you at a later date. Perhaps when Harry is better?"

Harry nodded, "I agree with Hermione." Harry said quietly.

Remus nodded and Sirius sighed, "We would not have this problem if that sniveling rat hadn't..."

"What ifs' will not help anyone as of right now Mr. Black." Dumbledore said quietly, "The hour is getting late, and I am sure Harry needs his rest. We will talk more on this another day."

Sirius nodded, "Of course Albus." He leaned over and embraced Harry before taking on his animagus form and sitting in wait at the door.

Remus hugged Harry and then joined Sirius. Dumbledore spoke to Harry, Hermione, and Ron briefly and then handed them a parchment with instructions on the next Occlumency exercises they were to practice. Dumbledore met the two marauders at the door and took down the privacy wards he had placed on the room when they had entered and bid the three children a good evening.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron looked at each other and relaxed. They talked about everything they had discussed that day and then laid on Harry's bed and spoke of the nonsensical things that youth often end up talking about, (meaning anything and everything that came to their minds at the time).

By nightfall Hermione and Ron left Harry to his own musings and he worried about school and healing as well as the newest dilemma. According to both the Wizard and Muggle world, Harry was still considered under age. He now had no guardian and no sense of regular income. He was happy to be away from the Dursleys to be sure, and he had meant it when he had said he did not want to press charges against them. He felt, strangely enough, that it was their horrible treatment of him that had led him to so strongly despise people like Draco Malfoy. To steer away from the same behavior that had led Tom Riddle to his Voldemort Persona.

Harry felt that if he had grown up in different circumstances he would not have been strong enough to survive and to face the trials that he had been through thus far. It was a strangely satisfying thought. The Dursleys had unconsciously prepared Harry for all of the horrors he had been through. He was alive because of their rough treatment. They had taught him how to survive under cruel circumstances. Harry smiled grimly, if Vernon Dursley was aware that he was the reason Harry was still alive the large man would probably have a hernia.

Harry laughed out loud at the imagery such a thought brought on. He was sickeningly delighted that Vernon Dursley had failed in his quest to destroy Harry Potter. Just as he was proud of the fact that he had defied Timmy Ripple on more than one occasion and survived.

Harry hated his title as "The-Boy-Who-Lived" but he found that ironically it was a title that he lived up to in a very literal sense. Harry smiled up at his dark ceiling, how strange his life was...every dark experience should have either rendered him comatose or at least

driven him to an incomprehensible darkness. Yet...there Harry was. Lying in a hospital bed, (of which he was far too comfortable in to be even remotely healthy), and more or less thriving. He had people who loved him dearly that he would not give up for the world and he faced danger just about every day of his life.

Harry was the very epitome of Irony. Harry smirked, and he loved it.

A Golden Gaze

"How about if we split the temporary guardianship." Mrs. Jane Granger sat with her husband, Edward, and daughter, Hermione, around Harry's hospital bed the next afternoon.

The Weasley parents sat across from them with their son Ron and Daughter Ginny as the adults tried to make sense of Harry's custody problems. Sirius and Remus both sat to either side of Harry and Albus Dumbledore sat at the end of the bed between the three families watching the proceedings in silence.

"That could work but it might be difficult for Harry to adjust to two different homes." Remus stated holding a book on the legal rules of child custody in the Wizarding and the Muggle communities.

He was fingering through the pages of both books trying to find a past case that involved temporary guardianship.

Harry shook his head in contradiction to Remus's statement, "I really wouldn't mind either way Remus," Harry muttered, "But I don't want to make things difficult to either family. I've all ready received a great deal of kindness from both...And I'm not helping right now am I?"

Hermione smiled and Ginny smirked, "No," She grinned, "You're not."

Harry smiled sheepishly and looked to his silent God Father, "I guess I should just keep my mouth shut then huh?"

"No," Molly Weasley smiled, "You're opinion is the most important at the moment Harry. Now, we really wouldn't mind having you stay at our house, as we all ready have so many children at home, what's one more?"

Ed Granger shook his head, "But Molly, Arthur," He nodded to both heads of the Weasley household, "I know how much Harry means to

you, how he means to all of us but...how will having another boy in the house, especially one with special medical needs, effect the houses income?"

"Well," Arthur Weasley looked at his wife and took her hand, "We'll manage...we all ways do."

"Mr. Weasley," Harry stated quietly, "I accept you're generosity and I am very grateful to you and Molly for always treating me as another son...but medical bills..." He sighed worried, "I don't want to put that financial strain on you."

"That's actually why I felt a shared guardianship might work." Jane intervened, "That way the financial expenses will be split evenly between our two families."

"I will pay for the medical expenses." Sirius intervened, "I have more money then I know what to do with...and even with a temporary guardianship in place, Harry is still my Godson. I should have the right to help out in some way."

The Weasleys and Grangers agreed to Sirius's offer.

"I have an idea...but I'm not sure how you, as adults, will like it." Hermione quietly voiced, "Remus may I have those books for a minute?"

Remus handed Hermione the legal books without question and she immediately began to thumb through them until she reached whatever it was she was looking for. She skimmed through the words and nodded to herself before turning around the wizard book and pointing to a specific paragraph.

"In the Wizard law book there is a case where an orphaned boy was able to gain a sponsored emancipation." Hermione stated, "It means he was receiving an income from an outside source so that he could

live comfortably and still focus on schooling until he was of age to inherit his family's fortune." Hermione frowned, "Of course he was a pure blood heir as well but so is Harry, technically."

"That's right," Sirius smiled, "When he is of age he will inherit not only the Potter fortune but the Potter magic and title of 'Lord' as well."

Harry's eyes were wide when he heard this and Sirius smirked at his godson, "What?" He asked grinning, "You didn't honestly think being the last of the Potter clan meant you got nothing but that small vault your parents left aside for your schooling did you?" Sirius gained a contemplative look and regarded Harry carefully, "Actually," He muttered, "If I remember correctly there was more to that title than what I can fully recall..." He shook his head, "No matter, the point I am trying to make is that you are a pure-blood heir and that you could be eligible for a sponsored emancipation."

"I don't know..." Remus said quietly, "Harry, you've been through a lot and you grew up very independently if what you told me about the...Dursleys," He snarled the name before continuing, "is true. You would most certainly be a good candidate for emancipation...but I wonder if you are able to take care of yourself because of such abuse."

Harry looked at Remus in silence, "I'm not entirely sure I can live under someone else's rules to tell you the truth." Harry stated, "I'm a little weary of being told what to do and when to do it. I spent most of this summer only relying on myself...I don't know if I can go back to having an adult supervise where I go and when."

He looked at the people present, "I hope I'm not offending anyone when I say that it's just...I think I'd feel a little trapped."

"But you've been in the hospital under the supervision of adults..." Ron stated, "You haven't felt trapped here have you?"

"Well," Harry smiled, "I haven't really had a chance to feel trapped yet because it's not like I can go anywhere but...it's not really the same is it? I see different doctors and healers every day here...It's not like a parent or guardian is it?"

"I guess you have a point." Jane Granger nodded, "So here's what we'll do," She leaned forward in her chair and placed her elbows on her knees looking at Harry more fully in the eyes, "We'll split the guardianship the first year at least. Sirius will pay for any medical bills that come up and both the Weasleys and Ed and I will take care of you together. This on its own will give you more freedom than if just one of us decided to take you in. As you will have two guardians we will have to be more lenient on some of the rules, especially if we want to prepare you for life on your own. If at the end of the year, which means one year from today, we feel you are ready, we will sponsor your emancipation."

The brown haired woman looked around the room in confirmation and slowly everyone in the room agreed. Dumbledore smiled and left to get the legal paper work and a signature from the Dursleys while the adults discussed when Harry was going to be with whom. It was decided that Holidays would be spent at the Burrow with both families celebrating together. The first half of the summer Harry would be at the Grangers and the second half would be spent at the Burrow. Sirius and Remus were invited during the holidays and to visit either home whenever it suited them to do so.

Dumbledore came back into the room that evening when the rest of the Weasleys had arrived and everyone was eating some good old fashioned Muggle fast food for dinner. He dragged in Harry's trunk and told Harry Hedwig was spending the rest of the summer at the Hogwarts Owlry. Harry thanked Dumbledore, (he had been worried about his owl), and then he and Hermione sat down to go through his trunk to get rid of the things he wouldn't need and keep the things he'd definitely need for school that next year.

Hermione pulled out some of his clothing and held them up to inspect them. She wrinkled her nose at the too-large size and the state of disrepair that most of his clothing was in. She looked at Harry disapprovingly as he fished out the silent sneakscope from a pair of incredibly large muddy colored socks. Hermione put the shirt down and pulled out a pair of boxers that had far too many holes in it to be considered wearable any longer.

"What do you do to you're clothing Harry?" Hermione asked alerting the other females in the room.

Harry glanced at the boxers she was holding, "I don't wear those anymore."

"Than what are they doing in you're trunk?" Hermione asked.

"I forgot to throw them away?" Harry wondered absently as he staked his fourth year books.

Hermione shot a helpless look towards Ginny and she in turn looked at the only other females in the room with the same expression. Molly, Jane and Ginny immediately put their food down to help Hermione inspect Harry's limited wardrobe. They all looked at Harry incredulously.

"You've been wearing these for how long?" Ginny asked.

Harry shrugged, "Since they were thrown at me by my Aunt whenever Dudley outgrew them?"

Fred held up a shirt that Harry normally tucked in and grimaced.

"Mate," he shook his head, "You could carry a bloody circus in this rag."

Harry frowned, "Well that's how all of them are."

"All of them?" Ginny asked incredulously.

She began pulling things out at random and found that Harry was right. She absently wondered how she'd never noticed it before. Ginny looked at Harry critically and realized that this was why he had always seemed so scrawny before. He was taller than she was but he'd always seemed much shorter in his clothing.

Ron shrugged, answering Ginny's question, "Yeah, he's always dressed in that shite."

"Ron!" Mrs. Weasley cried, "Don't curse!"

"What Mum?" Ron asked defensively, "It's true, don't you remember whenever he'd come over for the Holidays? Harry's clothes have always been too big for him."

"And they've never really been mine either." Harry stated, "Sometimes Dudley would come in and reclaim some of the more wearable clothes as his. I couldn't argue it because the Dursleys always reminded me that they weren't mine to begin with."

Shocked silence met his statement and Jane looked at Molly with determination.

"Tomorrow." She stated, "We are getting Harry new clothes."

"Preferably clothing that fits him." Molly Weasley agreed.

"And we're going with you." Ginny gestured to herself and Hermione.

"As are we." The twins agreed.

Silence met their statement as everyone stared at the two tricksters in bemusement.

"What?" Fred asked defensively, "We can't trust a bunch of women to pick out tasteful clothing for a teenage boy now can we?"

"No indeed," George agreed, "It would be travesty to leave this up to any female. They'll only make him look queer."

Said women were beginning to bristle at the twins insensitive statements.

"It's up to us to make sure he gains a manly style that still holds the hint of sophistication that begets a young boy to live up to his image." Fred stated passionately.

"Oh and I'm sure you know all about that." Ginny deadpanned.

"Actually dear sister," George placed an arm around Ginny and smirked, "you're esteemed elder brothers know quite a bit about what makes a man look good and how doing so will not only boost a man's ego but how it will also adhere to a lady's eye."

"Although there's not much we can do about you're scars..." Fred frowned, "Sorry mate."

Harry shrugged amused at the banter he was witnessing, "Not a big deal, believe me."

George regarded Harry critically, "No, I think we can find a way to make the scars work for him brother."

"Hmmm?" Fred asked and scrutinized Harry who by this point was wondering whether or not to be worried by their stares, "Ah, I see what you mean George..."

Both twins fell into silence and planned while the women of the room rolled their eyes and shot worried glances toward the duo.

"Well," Hermione stated holding up one of Harry's less wearable t-shirts and brining the attention back to the wardrobe, "that only leaves the question about what we're going to do about these." She grinned and the other children present grinned devilishly back at her.

"Professor," Ron asked Dumbledore, "Could we take Harry up to the roof so that he could practice a bit of control over his new fire abilities?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled and he looked at Molly Weasley, "Well Mrs. Weasley? Do you have any objections?"

Mrs. Weasley frowned, "Not if an adult wizard or witch accompanied you."

"What about a former fire man?" Jane granger asked wagging her eyes at her husband who frowned.

"I'm not a fire-fighter any more Jane." He stated.

"No Ed," Jane smiled, "But I'm sure you remember how to handle fire safely."

"How about you and I go." Remus smiled at Ed Granger, "That way if anything gets out of hand there will be a trained fire-fighter and a fully trained wizard on ready."

Ed frowned but nodded. Mrs. Weasley nodded to her children and they helped Harry into his wheel chair enthusiastically. So a troop of red heads, a Werewolf, a fireman-turned dentist, a cripple in a wheel chair and one frizzy haired brunette ventured up to the roof carefully avoiding any hospital personnel. When they finally reached the roof George pulled out the over-large remnants of Harry's broken childhood and placed all articles of clothing in a pile on the floor of the flat roof.

Remus placed an anti-burn charm underneath the pile and gestured to Harry as everyone stepped back. Harry closed his eyes searching for the heat he knew was inside of him carefully pushing the feeling of heat from his chest to his right arm. He slowly pulled his arm up and held it out toward the pile, his right hand clenched into a fist. He opened his eyes and watched in fascination as fire gently rose out of his skin, dancing along the lines of scars that made hatch marks across his arm. The flames slowly moved toward his clenched fist and built up around it to form a flaming ball around his hand.

Harry smirked at the fire and it responded to him flickering towards the pile of cloth that sat on the middle of the roof. He looked at the awed faces of his friends and smiled reassuringly. He remembered this feeling, he'd done this before...all he had to do was to throw the fire at the pile of clothing and the fire would leave him for a short time before it built up again.

So Harry grinned at the clothing that represented his childhood and brought his arm back bracing himself.

"This is to you Dudykins." Harry whispered as he flung his arm outward toward the rags of clothing.

The ball of fire flew toward the cloth and fell on it consuming the clothing hungrily. Hermione and the other red-heads cheered. Edward Granger whooped in amazement and Remus smiled as Harry shot his fire free fist into the air yelling in triumph.

"Ha!" Ron yelled, "Harry that was brilliant!"

"Yeah!" Harry laughed, "Now if only I could control it on a smaller scale!"

"We'll work on that!" Hermione grinned as the Twins and Ginny began to chant and dance around the burning clothes, "To Dudykins!"

To Dudykins! To Dudykins! Ha ha ha!"

They fooled around until the last strand of fabric vanished into the wind as ash and then took Harry back down to his room laughing and replaying what they saw verbally to Harry. Harry smiled and replayed the feeling of building the fire within his mind. He was secretly amazed he'd been able to control it to such an extent. He went to sleep content with the knowledge that he could control the fire if he really needed to.

The next morning Harry woke up to the physical therapist shoving some vitamins and his breakfast onto his bed. After he ate she drilled him rigorously in his exercises and left just as frustrated by his lack of progress as he was. After she left Harry's main Doctor and main Healer walked in with the two fidgety nurses. They nodded to Harry and began to methodically unwrap the Bandage on Harry's head. They told him the healing magic in the cloth should be finished working on his eye.

"Now Mr. Evans," The Healer stated, "There is no guarantee that you're eye will ever be able to see again, even with all of the healing we have implemented into it. I don't want to get you're hopes up about such an extreme injury."

Harry fidgeted with a mixture of worry and excitement as they unwrapped one layer after another from his skull. For the first time in over a month Harry felt cool air kiss the skin of the left side of his face, and he closed his green eye in anticipation.

"All right Mr. Evans." The doctor muttered as he pulled the stitches they had been forced to use on his eyelid out of his skin, "After I finish taking these out and you're Healer seals the skin the stitches were in I am going to ask you to try to open you're right eye. Leave the left eye closed please."

"All right." Harry agreed too afraid to move his head for fear of messing the doctor up.

Harry felt the odd pull from doctor as he carefully cut and pulled out the stitches. Warmth caressed his right eye as the healer used her wand to seal the holes left by the stitches and when the warmth dissipated she asked him to open the eye.

At first Harry feared he couldn't do it, the newly healed muscles that allowed him to move his eyelid were stiff with lack of use. But slowly Harry was able to pull the lid upward and blink. The Healer and Doctor gasped when they witnessed the bright golden color of his iris. It appeared as though molten gold metal swirled around his eye in bright metallic golds to deep equally metallic oranges. The middle of his iris was not black either but a deep red that at first glance could pass for a warm ebon.

Colors flooded Harry's vision. Dancing colors that permeated the air and swirled around the healer and her wand filled his eyesight. He couldn't make out the details of the faces of the men and women in front of him but he could see each of their individual colors pulsing from inside of them out into the air.

Harry quickly opened his other eye and blinked several times. The colors he saw from his right eye merged with the normal vision of his left and Harry felt as though a pair of 3-D glasses had been placed over his eyes. The depth he now saw in the world around him was astounding. Harry could see the magic he had only just felt before. The sparkling dust that hovered and danced in the air gave everything an ethereal quality and the auras of the human beings in front of him were more prominent and strangely connected to each other.

The world had changed for Harry and it was more beautiful than he had ever given credit to it for. Harry didn't ever want to close his eyes again.

"Mr. Evans," The Medi-Witch asked cautiously, "Can you see?"

Harry focused on her but found his right eye would only focus on the magic within her. So to the witch it appeared as though his left eye had lost most of its visibility.

He nodded to the woman, "Yes," He said slowly, "I can see...sort of."

"What do you mean...sort of?" The doctor asked.

"Well," Harry said his voice quiet because he was still in awe at his new find, "It's hard to explain..."

So Harry tried to explain it to the two medical professionals. The Doctor was confused and the Medi-Witch was skeptical so she conjured a small blue ball and held it out to Harry. Harry took it into his hands and examined the small object carefully.

"What color is that ball Mr. Evans?" The witch asked.

"Blue...no...yellow...wait," Harry squinted at the ball carefully with both eyes and then looked up at the witch, "It's blue, but it's surrounded by a sphere of tiny yellow runes. The same yellow that surrounds you madam."

The witch looked at him astounded and banished the ball in a flash of fair yellow light, "I don't believe it." She said, "It takes years of practice for a wizard to be able to see the individual magic of each witch or wizard."

"Is that what I'm seeing?" Harry asked.

"Yes." The Healer breathed, "I don't know what spell hit your eye, but you can be sure that you now have a very useful gift."

"Have both of your eyes always been that peculiar shade of green?" The Muggle doctor asked.

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "Always."

"Hmmm..." the Doctor contemplated looking to the healer, "Is it normal for the eye to change in color like it has when hit with a curse?"

Harry looked at the doctor startled as the Healer answered, "No," She shook her head, "Normally the eye will no longer function or else it is lost. This is a very unusual case."

"Wait a minute," Harry stated, "My eye is a different color?"

The two medical professionals looked at each other uneasily, "Well..." The doctor began, "Yes, it is."

A nurse wordlessly handed Harry a mirror and Harry stared first at the massive scar that ran from the top of his right forehead to the middle of his neck. The scar went through his right golden eye. Harry stared at the unusual color noticing his own fiery aura dance around him like the flames that Harry could call around him. Harry noticed the red in the middle of his iris instead of black and flinched remembering another cold red eye. Harry didn't recognize his face at all, and if it weren't for the fact that his left eye was still the vivid green he remembered, he would have called the Muggle nurse beside him false.

Harry thanked the nurse quietly and handed the mirror back to her with shaky hands. His own image haunted his thoughts as he stared at his nearly unresponsive legs. For one frightening moment, Harry's scar throbbed...but after checking the wards Dumbledore placed on his mind Harry sighed. He bet Voldemort would find great pleasure in his scarred face.

"Mr. Evans?" The Doctor asked.

Harry smiled the lop-sided grin he had become accustomed to using at the Muggle man, "Could we put the bandage back?" He asked jokingly.

The Medi-Witch looked at him startled, "Mr. Evans, do you know how much of a miracle your eye is?"

"Yes," Harry said, "I mean...maybe." He sighed, "I guess I'm just getting tired of healing...I didn't expect..." Harry smiled, "I guess I'm not really sure what I expected." He took the Witch's hand and shook it sincerely, "Thank you. I mean it." He shook the hand of the Muggle Doctor, "Thanks to both of you. I can't even begin to tell you how grateful I am. Thank you."

As the Doctor and Healer tested Harry, the boy watched the swirling dust around him as it danced serenely and wondered. Why had his eye changed color as it had? Could it possibly have something to do with how he was stabbed with his own wand? Perhaps it had something to do with his new fire affinity?

Harry didn't know and frankly, he wasn't sure he wanted to. Voldemort's red eyes haunted Harry and Harry's red pupil worried him...Although, Harry smiled, he wouldn't give up his new sight for the world. If a red pupil was the price to pay for seeing the world as he did now...? Harry would learn to deal with it. He guessed the thing that made him the saddest was that his right eye was no longer his mother's gift. He'd never hear people tell him his eyes were like hers again.

Harry answered all of the questions the Doctor and Healer asked him as they tested his right eye's vision. Apparently Harry's depth perception was pretty off which Harry could attest to. Everything looked like it had so much more to it; the length of an object in front of Harry had grown and shortened at the same time. Looking around

was both beautiful and incredibly dizzying. Harry purposely kept his gaze steady only staring in one direction at a time.

What was frustrating about his right eye was that it wouldn't focus like it used to. It wouldn't focus on the object that he was looking at. It would only focus on the aura each object emitted.

That was another question Harry now had...how did everything have an aura? Or was it really an aura like what Harry saw with living beings? Was it just energy building up around each object? And why were there pockets of more dense dust in random spots in the air?

Harry closed his eyes and thanked the doctors as they left. His mind was swirling with thoughts and questions that he would have to ask and think on as he awaited Hermione and Ron's arrival. He grinned imagining their reactions to his newest features.

Thus, the end of this chapter. Has anyone else ever put on 3-D glasses and had difficulty walking straight? Or is that just me... I do hope I have portrayed his eye sight as I imagined it. If it is too confusing to anyone I would appreciate it if you let me know. I will continue to try to make it clearer.

I'd like to stress that I have appreciated all the input that I have gotten. I would like to try to answer a few questions pertaining to Harry's willingness to open up to his loved ones and how he reacts when confronted with the abuse issue. It is in my limited experience that some times (and I'd like to really stress that 'sometimes') abuse victims don't feel they are actually being abused. This would be Harry's case. He had never experienced anything better before leaving on the train for Hogwarts so he didn't feel it was unusual. Unfair maybe, but not really unusual. I'm not sure how to really explain it. I feel Harry probably didn't ever question the Dursley's treatment of him until meeting Ron's family.

It's not that the Dursleys didn't abuse him, because they did. In more

then one way and on more then one account...It's just Harry has been through so much within the past summer that he doesn't see what the Dursleys did to him as anything important. I have met people who believe that if a hand is not raised against a child...they are not abusing said kid. It makes me sad that some people believe that.

Child abuse is a sensitive subject and I hope that I have not offended anyone in brining it up. Everyone has different reactions to these situations, Harry reacts by clinging to those he loves and talking to the people he respects. Not everyone dose this.

Also, please keep in mind that Harry, Hermione and Ron really are only fifteen. They're at that age where they are going to mess around and find stupid, childish things as they're own personal inside jokes. I know a lot of their actions and the situations they are constantly thrown into make them seem older...but I hoped to remind people of their ages through their banter.

I hope I have answered some questions. And I do hope you all continue sending me more. I really do appreciate questions and especially constructive criticism. Thank you for reading and sending me you're thoughts.

-Red

Sunsets and Changing Rooms

Hermione quietly stepped into Harry's hospital room secretly happy to find some sense of silence after the seemingly hectic shopping trip she had ventured on with the others earlier that day. The earlier six who had resolved to go clothes shopping for Harry had quickly turned into seven when Mr. Weasley learned that they would make the majority of the trip in Muggle London. Once Mr. Weasley had to go so too did Mr. Granger. Ed had wanted to give the Weasley Patriarch a real tour of the "joys of simple Muggle life". Aka: the various Muggle Pubs in the area and the electronics store. To say Hermione's father and Arthur had a wonderful time running around like old drinking buddies would have been an understatement.

The ladies and the Twins had quickly abandoned the two elder men in pursuit of a less embarrassing shopping trip. Unfortunately once they had actually hit the bleeding shops The Twins immediately began arguing with everything the women picked out and began shoving some of the strangest articles of clothing into the large shopping bags Molly and Jane had ever lay eyes on. At once colossal arguments sprung up until George grabbed one of his outfits he tried the bloody clothing on himself.

Hermione had been immensely surprised at how well the clothing had gone together and was loathe admitting that they may be right. So after a tense silence The Ladies and The Twins decided to compromise in styles that could complement each other if mixed and matched.

Then both of the Patriarchs came back.

Hermione leaned against the door and closed her eyes trying to remind herself that the day was just about over. The sun was setting, Ron would be arriving any moment, and every one else was back at the burrow packing Harry's new clothing in gift bags. Hermione breathed deeply and allowed the silence of the room to soak in

before opening her eyes again.

The sight that met her gaze was one she would not soon forget. The window at the far end of the room was open fully and the orange light from the rare sun was shining through blanketing the room with an ethereal glow. On the edge of Harry's bed the young boy sat. He was a dark figure that was silhouetted against the evening light. His back was held strait and proud and Hermione was reminded of a blissfully melancholy scene in an old movie she had watch when she was a child. It had been one of those scenes where the tragic hero of the story stood in the dieing sunlight as he reached the moment of calm before the climax of his journey. It was a terribly sad posture that still somehow portrayed the happy, hopeful, feeling everyone wants to find in movies.

Hermione didn't realize she was memorizing this scene in her mind. She was barely aware she hadn't moved from the spot in front of the door. He looked so peaceful...Hermione hadn't seen him so peaceful in a while and she knew that this peace, this time to heal was not going to last. How she wanted it to last...Harry deserved happiness, he had never done anything to deserve the life fate had thrown at him. He should be furious with the fates. He should whine, complain, and fight the pressure that had been placed upon his shoulders since walking into the Wizarding world. He should scream at every person who stared at his scar reminding him that his parents had died and he had somehow survived...

Yet, Harry had always taken everything thrown at him in stride. He'd complained, yes, he'd complained about not wanting any publicity...but he had never whined, never cried about how unfair life was or about how much he hated the people who stared at him on the street. For as long as she'd known him, Harry hadn't uttered a single curse against someone who didn't deserve it. He didn't judge people until after he got to know them...he hadn't judged her when every one else always had.

The boy had all the budding qualities of a tragic hero. She knew it, and so did he. He carried the weight of the Wizarding world every day and Hermione was sure, that he wouldn't have it any other way.

Hermione wasn't aware that she was walking until she reached the bed and wrapped her arms around her best friend's shoulders. She felt the tensing in his muscles that signaled the tell tale flinch Harry did every time someone touched him. He'd done it ever since she could remember and now Hermione had an idea why. She had just had this overwhelming urge to hold him in her arms, to remind herself that he was real and that this past month had not been a lie.

"Hey Hermione," Harry said quietly.

It hit her then, listening to that voice, he was so young...he was still a child...and she realized so was she.

"Hey," She whispered back laying her chin on top of his head to look out the window with him, "What are you watching?" She smiled slightly, "Anything good on?"

Harry chuckled and Hermione could see in her mind the left side of his lips curl up in amusement, his green eye sparkling in mischief, "Yeah," She could hear the amusement in his voice, "I always did like the sunset channel."

"Hmmm..." Hermione smiled, "Me too."

She was aware of his right hand gently grasping her right forearm as he leaned into her slightly to lift some of his weight off of his wrists.

"You're leaving soon." He stated, and she was reminded again of their age.

"Tomorrow," Hermione nodded against his head, "To Hogwarts again," She sighed, "Though, I'm not nearly ready to go."

"Sorry about that." Harry smirked, "But it was you're idea to continue to waste you're time looking for me instead of doing you're homework."

Hermione frowned and poked him lightly in the side, "It wasn't a waste, and don't joke about that!"

"Ah," Harry said sagely, "My apologies, I didn't realize it wasn't yet time to joke about that..."

"Hmph," Hermione tightened her hold around his chest, pulling him closer, "It will never be a good joke to me. Years into the future that will still never be funny...You can't possibly understand what it was like to be standing in those stands. To watch Cedric's dead body appear on the field without you. To hear the applause and celebration turn into screams of horror. Everyone began to slowly realize...And you weren't there...We waited...I waited for you to appear...you never did."

Harry turned around in her arms searching for her face amongst the long curly strands of her hair. He was surprised to find tears in her chocolate irises, tears mixed with fear and frustration as she continued speaking.

"I couldn't concentrate on the final exams....I couldn't sleep. I barely ate..." Her arms tensed as she clenched her fists against the back of his neck, "I kept dreaming of seeing you appear...you're pale fingers clasped around the Cup...you're eyes staring blankly into eternity..."

Harry pulled Hermione to him wrapping his arms around her as she spoke, his eyes wide as he felt the intense emotions that were pulsing from her aura. It surrounded the air with a deep royal blue beat. He hadn't been aware that her feelings were still so raw, so deep. If Harry had been aware he wouldn't have cracked such a morbid joke on his own behalf.

"Such a joke..." Hermione spat as she shook against him, "Such humor will never amuse me Harry. Please don't do it again."

Harry nodded and unconsciously held her tighter as she choked out a sob.

"Please don't leave like that again..." She whispered, "Please."

"I won't," Harry said gently, "Not if I can help it."

"Good." Hermione said fiercely, her lips pouted, trembling, "If you do...I'll kill you myself."

Harry laughed.

"I mean it Harry Potter!" Hermione cried as his shoulders shook with his amusement.

Hermione glared strait into his eyes and she gasped. She hadn't noticed it before because she was never directly facing the right side of his face. Now that she was, Hermione couldn't tear her gaze away. She was awed by the brilliant molten gold that stared back at her.

Almost of its own accord her left hand rose to trace the angry scar that split his right eye. Harry flinched when she touched the scar where it ripped down his cheek and watched her eyes as they followed her fingers down the scar to end at the midway point of his neck.

"You're eye," She said as her eyes shot back up, "It's—!"

"Not green." Harry stated.

"Obviously." Hermione leaned back away from him and inspected it critically, "But it's not bad...Last I saw of it, there was no eye." She

stated matter of fact, "Can you see out of it?"

Harry smiled and explained how he saw out of his right eye and was immediately rewarded by Hermione's curiosity taking full control of her actions. Suddenly Harry was being poked and prodded experimentally. He was bombarded with questions he didn't know the answers to and Harry felt at the end of Hermione's interrogation that he'd be receiving another one after she had access to the school library. The young witch had that gleam in her eyes that told Harry that she had just found something to research and obsess over.

He guessed it couldn't be helped. It was in the girl's nature to dissect everything she came into contact with. As he watched her pace in front of his bed Harry smiled bemused. He loved her for her inquisitive nature just as he loved Ron for his lazy tendencies. He supposed the three of them were such good friends because they loved the weird things about each other. Not because they had anything in common...though that did help on occasion.

Speaking of the red head, Harry calked his head to the side recognizing Ron's unique magical signature pulling at the edge Harry's awareness. The boy was at least inside the Hospital if not directly in front of Harry's door and Harry smiled to himself wondering how long it would take Ron to notice the right side of his face. It had certainly taken Hermione quite a bit of time considering how intuitive the girl was.

Harry watched the door and noticed a soft brown glow peeking out of the bottom crack where the wood met the floor. Harry's inward senses were telling Harry that the red glow was Ron. It was interesting to be able to see the magical signatures his senses had committed to memory.

Sure enough soon Ron was opening the door laden down with brightly colored boxes and looking harried and exhausted.

"Mental," He growled, "All of them. Even the Muggles! No offense 'Mione but I always thought Muggles would be less hot tempered..."

Hermione smirked, "See why I left Headquarters as quickly as possible?" She chuckled, "I warned you when we got back didn't I?"

"Right," Ron huffed as he dumped the boxes onto Harry's bed, "As if I've ever listened to you're warnings in the past..." He glared at the packages on Harry's bed, "What is he going to do with all of these any ways? A bloke only needs a couple of pants and t-shirts to get by...I don't know what half of this shite even is!"

Hermione rolled her eyes, "Of course you wouldn't."

Harry looked at the boxes incredulously, "You guys weren't kidding when you said you were going shopping for me were you?"

Hermione laughed, "Of course not. You honestly expected us, (as proper family), to allow you to run around naked?"

Harry blushed, "Well I didn't expect you all to go all out like this."

Ron rolled his eyes, "This isn't even half of what's coming Mate," He gestured at the boxes and slumped down into the chair by Harry's bed, "I grabbed what was ready as an excuse to get out of the house and over here as quickly as I could. Problem was you're Mum," He nodded at Hermione, "Shoved five other completely wrapped boxes I hadn't seen into my hands." His hand began massaging his temples exhaustedly, "As if I didn't have enough to carry."

Ron sighed dramatically and leaned his head back against the top of the chair.

"Completely mental." He sighed and closed his eyes.

Harry chuckled, "So there's more clothing coming?"

Ron opened one eye to regard his friend, "Yeah—Wha?"

Hermione laughed as Ron's other eye jumped open and shot forward in his chair. Both of his eyes were wide as he stared at Harry's bemused face. His mouth reached the floor in his shock.

"What happened to you're eye?!" Ron asked.

"Just my eye?" Harry looked at Hermione as she laughed and smiled, "What about my face?"

"Holy Shit!" Ron yelled, "What is that?"

"A scar Ron," He looked at Hermione who was now leaning on the bed in her mirth, "He seems a bit slow today." He smirked, "Have you any idea why?"

"But you're eye, it's--!" Ron cried.

Harry rolled his eyes and sighed, "Not green."

'It's not green' became the phrase of the evening for Harry that night as everyone that walked into the room had similar reactions to Ron when confronted with Harry's eye. Harry supposed it was a small blessing they noticed that first and not his horrendous scar. Although, in retrospect, Harry felt that they were simply avoiding looking at the scar by focusing on his unusual right eye first. Not that he could blame them. Harry himself had winced when he'd seen the cut trailing down his face earlier that day. It had taken him all day to get used to the image in his mind and he was still trying to adjust to the new way he could see the world.

Yet directly after the exclamations of surprise and the awkward questions Harry's loving surrogate families effectively forced Harry's mind away from his appearance by shoving large and small brightly

colored packages into his lap. After a lot of encouragement Harry began tearing the packages open to reveal more articles of clothing than he'd ever owned in his entire life. He sat staring at each article of clothing with an overwhelming look of bewilderment on his face for a good ten minutes before glancing at the eager faces around him.

"Are all of these mine?" He asked incredulously.

Ginny rolled her eyes, "No, there for the nurses...of course there your's dummy!"

"But this is..." He stared at everyone around the room his face turning frantically from left to right, "Are you sure people normally have this much clothing?"

"Of course dear." Molly Weasley stated, "You have clothing for winter, underwear, clothing for summer, socks, jackets, t-shirts for casual, button up shirts for less casual, robes for our world, jeans, nice pants, shorts, swim trunks, shoes...just about everything you need for the year."

Harry's head was spinning as Mrs. Weasley listed some of the items they bought.

"He looks like he's going to faint doesn't he?" Ron asked Hermione quietly.

Hermione silently agreed nodding, her brown eyes laughing at the dumbfounded expression on her friends face.

"We just wanted to be sure you'd be prepared for any type of weather Harry," Mrs. Granger smiled, "I think we even included a poncho somewhere in there."

Harry stared at her and then reached into the pile and pulled out a green rubbery material and opened it up, "So you did." He stated

dazed.

He placed the poncho down and stared at it a bit, "You didn't have to...you shouldn't have..." He looked up his face confused, "No body has ever done this for me before..."

"Well of course we'd help you out love," Mrs. Granger frowned, "You're our responsibility now, part of the family. Did you expect us to let one of our own run around stark naked?"

At first Harry stared at the Granger Matriarch. Hermione had said nearly the same thing earlier and for a moment the woman's demeanor reminded Harry so much of his best friend that his thought process had to pause in confusion. Then he laughed; now he knew where Hermione got part of her personality. It was strange to actually see someone take after the person who raised them. Harry was nothing at all like his aunt or uncle and though he hadn't been raised by them, Harry carried pieces of his mother and father in his personality and his actions. He wondered what other things he'd notice as the Grangers and Weasleys took it upon themselves to be his guardians. He wondered if he'd experience what it felt like to have an actual 'family'.

"Thank you." He said meaning it, "I've never actually owned clothing that might actually fit."

"Oh they'll certainly fit!" Mr. Weasley grinned, "I charmed the fabric to make sure they do! We weren't too sure on you're specific sizes so I tinkered with the thread of the fabrics...so if anything doesn't fit at first you can be sure it will after ten minutes of wearing it!"

Harry smiled, "Thanks Mr. Weasley."

"Arthur please, Harry." Mr. Weasley corrected, "You're one of us. You don't need to keep to any formalities."

Harry nodded. Another thing he was going to have to get used to.

At everyone's urging Harry pulled out some clothing and tried his new jeans on and a black long-sleeved shirt. While changing the ladies stood outside his pulled bed curtains and Ron, Arthur and Ed helped Harry re-learn how to put actual clothing on. After he had all articles of clothing on as he was supposed to, Harry was helped into his wheel chair and wheeled out of the curtained bed.

He blushed as the twins and Hermione and Ginny yelled out catcalls upon his exit and laughed when they made cracks at his now "sophisticated" appearance. Harry fingered the cotton material of the shirt and sighed.

"It sure would be nice to see what all of you're fuss is about," He smiled at the people in front of him and Hermione rolled her eyes at him.

"It sure would be nice' Harry?" She asked, "Oh please, you really are taking lessons from the twins." She placed her hands on her hips and smirked at Mrs. Weasley, "Mrs. Weasley, if you would kindly conjure our drama queen a mirror? I think he misses seeing his face."

"Hey!" Harry yelled hurt, "I thought it'd be rude to ask!" Harry tried not to smile as Ron snickered behind him.

Neither of his friends had fallen for his 'pathetic gimp' act. They knew him too well.

"Of course it wouldn't be rude!" Mrs. Weasley smiled unaware of what Harry had tried to do, "Arthur," She gestured in front of her, "Would you?"

Arthur smiled, "Certainly dear." The red headed Patriarch pulled out his wand and flicked it at the spot Molly had indicated.

A slow silver mist formed to Harry's height and slowly solidified into a shiny wall of metallic reflection in front of him. Harry stared at himself uneasily. He'd never been one to look into a mirror at himself and so he had never really cared about what he looked like. Appearance had never been an issue when he'd been a freak in a cupboard. Now he smiled grimly at his slightly frightening reflection. He wasn't yet sixteen and he all ready had battle scars to rival Mad Eye Moody. He thought that perhaps he should be more disturbed by his reflection yet Harry felt all ready that those scars were a big part of him. Just as the scar on his forehead was his trade mark.

"The clothes look good." He smiled as he scrutinized his reflection.

"Now we just need to cut you're hair." Molly Weasley smiled.

The unruly black locks had grown to Harry's neck in some places. It was still pretty wild and Harry was very aware that most of it was different lengths...but like the scars, his wild hair was a part of him. Though he was happy to note that it was a tad tamer then it used to be. It must be the length, he decided. It had never been quite so long so Harry had never had it do anything except stick up at odd angles. Now his bangs were so long that they lay over his face instead of above it and Harry liked how the length covered his cursed scar.

"No Molly," he said contemplatively, "I think I'd like to keep it long. It hides my scar."

"Oh...well..." Harry could almost hear the internal battle that was raging in the passionate woman's head as she debated her sympathy for him and her opinion of long hair, "I guess it would be ok...in this instance."

Harry smiled grateful he wouldn't have the elder red headed woman griping over his hair as he had seen her do to Bill whenever he was in town.

"I think it suits him Mum." Ginny defended.

"Yeah," Fred grinned, "It gives him a sort of debonair look to him doesn't it?"

"Debonair?" Harry asked, "With the scars?"

"More so with the scars," George smirked, "Well it's either Debonair or serial killer..."

"Oh thanks," Hermione deadpanned, "That's much better."

Ron smirked, "Add this then." He draped Harry's Dragon-hide cloak over his shoulders, placed the cane in his hand and added a blood red scarf around his neck for good measure, "Count Potter."

Everyone stared at Harry as he looked at himself in the mirror their lips twitching in amusement. Harry's own lips twitched upward in at the irony in Ron's statement. Count Potter, the Wizarding world's "vampire" savior... Though Ron did have a point with the new clothing and expensive looking robe and cane. Harry could easily pull off the look of an eccentric Count. His pale skin even helped complete it...

"Yep," Harry nodded at himself, "Definitely a scary image."

Hermione hit Harry's shoulder, "Shut up you," But she was smiling, "I think it gives you a rather mysterious air."

"Mysterious." Ron deadpanned, "Is definitely a word for it."

It was Ron's turn to be smacked on the shoulder.

Harry laughed at their antics and it was decided that Harry had to try on at least every shirt he had received. So he did. Harry's torso was still heavily bandaged as the wound from his wand had been rather severe and wasn't yet ready to be revealed so he had no qualms with

just changing his shirts in front of the girls.

He was surprised when the twins pointed out what they picked out for him, though; he felt he really shouldn't have been. The long sleeved black shirt he'd worn first had actually been one of the shirts. They picked out a couple of trendy pin-striped vests and they got him a top hat. Harry had looked at them strangely when they'd given him a hat. The style they were pushing was very classy and not something Harry would have originally picked out for himself but Harry found he really didn't mind it as much as he thought he might. Although, Harry refused to wear the suspenders they pushed at him until they convinced him to simply clipped the bloody things onto the pants and not actually wear them.

Harry glanced in the conjured mirror with the twin grinning behind him and the t-shirt/vest/top hat/suspender combo and was thoroughly surprised by the results. The look was tough enough to actually compliment his scars but smooth enough to give him a classical air...but Harry still felt he wasn't built enough for it yet.

"It's...actually...nice." He said surprised.

"He looks like some sort of pimp." Ron smirked.

"He looks good," Ginny defended.

"And the greatest thing about all of your clothes," Fred grinned, "Is you can inter-change any of them to however you like."

"Meaning you don't have to stick to the hat and vest combo if you don't want to." Hermione translated.

"I don't know," Harry said, "I like the vest...it's...different."

"Of course you do." George clapped Harry on the back looking around the room proudly, "The boy's got taste."

Harry rolled his eyes, "If I were in Broadway maybe."

"It dose...look nice Harry." Hermione encouraged, "Very classy."

"Maybe," Harry agreed.

Harry's evening of modeling ended with that outfit but the kids enjoyed their last night before having to leave him by staying late. Harry ended up falling asleep in his new clothes directly after saying goodbye to the twins and Ginny. Ron and Hermione ended up falling asleep next to him and Hermione's parents 'pitched tent' in one of the other hospital beds so they wouldn't need to wake them. The Weasley's promised to take their trunks for them to the train station as long as the Grangers took the two Ron and Hermione to the platform entrance. The Grangers agreed and let the trio sleep.

It would probably be the last time they could do so.

Toads and Loons

"Hermione love, it's time to wake up."

Hermione groaned and buried her head further into the warmth she found herself surrounded by. A gentle hand was rocking her shoulder annoyingly and Hermione lifted an arm and waved the offender away.

"Inna minnu' Mum..." She muttered.

Part of the warmth shifted behind her as she spoke. A freckled arm moved off of her side and the warmth on her back began to disappear. Hermione groaned and buried herself closer to the warmth at her front and the warmth at her back moved back. She smiled happily as warmth surrounded her once again and she began to still content.

Then the gentle prodding began again.

"Hermione," Jane Granger smirked looking at a very recent picture in the digital camera in her hand as she prodded her daughter again, "We're going to miss the train if the three of you don't wake up quickly and say you're goodbyes."

"Oodbyes?" She asked stretching slowly.

Her two sources of warmth moved away from her as she did so.

"You and Ron," Jane asked bemused pocketing her camera for later blackmail, "Does Hogwarts ring a bell?"

Hermione squinted up at her mother's hovering form, "Me and...?" She blinked blearily, "Ron...?"

"Hogwarts." Jane smiled.

"Ogwarts?" Hermione yawned.

"School." Jane continued raising an eyebrow at her daughter's incoherent early morning thought process.

"School?" Hermione asked blinking.

"Yes." Jane frowned, she was beginning to get impatient, "And we're going to be late."

"Oh!" Hermione's eyes shot open and she sprang up into a sitting position, "Hogwarts!" She looked to her left where Ron was sleeping and began to shake his shoulder frantically, "Ron! Wake up!"

"Mhp!" Was Ron's response as he rolled over to avoid waking up.

Hermione frowned and Jane Granger chuckled.

"Ron," Hermione shook his shoulder again, "Come on, get up!"

Hermione shook him hard and accidentally pushed the red head in doing so. Thus it was with a large 'thump' that Ron woke up to the cold white tiles of the hospital floor.

Harry woke up next to Hermione as her laughter penetrated his skull and she dropped back onto the bed shaking in mirth. She leaned over the side to stare at a very irate Ronald Weasley as he grumbled and stood.

"I am so sorry!" Hermione laughed.

"Yeah,' Ron growled, "You sure sound it."

"No really," Hermione tried to defend as she continued to laugh, "I didn't mean to push you over the side like that!"

Harry's lips were twitching bemused as he watched Ron glare at the laughing girl.

"It was funny Ron," Harry smiled, "Waking up to you on the floor like that."

"You would find it funny." Ron pouted though Harry noticed he was no longer glaring at Hermione.

"Don't you?" Harry asked innocently as he stretched.

Harry glanced at Ron out of the corner of his eye and smirked as he noticed the red-head trying not to laugh.

"Well I'm glad to see the three of you awake at last." Ed called as he walked into the room carrying a box that smelled suspiciously of Bangers.

Ed gave his wife a confused look as she quickly pocketed her camera and gave her husband a suspicious wink. She walked over and kissed him gently on the cheek. Her pale fingers pulled Ed's package from his hands as she kissed him. She handed the delectable sausage substance to the ravished red head now seated beside his equally hungry friends.

"Your daughter has inherited your inability to wake up." She stated grinning.

"Ah," Ed grinned and winked at his wife and glanced at his disheveled daughter, "I see what you mean..."

Hermione paused in her breakfast and frowned at her parents knowing that something had just transpired and that it was most likely going to be at her own expense later.

"Well kids," Jane smiled, "We will officially be ten minutes late if we

don't take the food on the road."

Her comment was greeted with three frozen stares. Each of the young adults' mouths were in varying degrees of being full and all three had severe cases of bed head. The fact that all of them looked as though they had just rolled out of bed, (which they actually really had), was too tempting for Mrs. Granger. She pulled out the camera she'd been hiding all morning and snapped a picture of the golden trio's finest moment. All three adolescents protested the camera loudly as Jane placed it back into her pocket grinning devilishly.

"So that's why you and Dad were conspiring!" Hermione cried, "What else have you used it for?"

"You'll find out after I've developed the film." Jane smiled.

"Mum," Hermione pouted, "That's a digital camera. Can't you just show us what you've taken now?"

"And risk you using magic to short-circuit any of the pictures you don't like?" Jane asked, "I think not young lady."

Hermione frowned while the boys grinned at her, "She knows me too well."

"I need to talk to that woman." Ron stated amazed, "Maybe she can help me understand you!"

Ed Granger shook his head, "Won't work Ron."

"Why not?" Ron asked.

"Because Jane is still female." Mr. Granger smiled, "And females, by nature, confuse men on instinct. The more we try to get help understanding them...the more we will fail." Ed laughed at Ron's crestfallen face, "The sooner you accept it the better."

"Now come on you two," Jane called, "Say you're goodbyes. We need to get going!"

The bemused atmosphere that had begun with Ron's question was now suddenly very somber. The Trio looked at each other willing themselves not to leave.

"Harry—." Hermione began.

Harry interrupted her holding a hand up in silence and shaking his head, "This isn't goodbye remember?" He asked smiling.

Hermione clenched her jaw seeing right through his happy/brave mask and launched herself at him. He dropped his banger back into the box and wrapped his arms around her fiercely.

"I'm counting on you to take notes for me." He smiled into her neck breathing in her scent and memorizing the feel of her royal blue magic as it swirled around him, "You know Ron won't be able to do it."

Hermione nodded against him before pulling away, "How long do you think until...?"

Until you can join us was the unspoken end of her question. Harry smiled and shrugged his shoulders shaking his head.

"Not long." He said determinedly.

Hermione nodded and backed away allowing Ron to have his turn at saying goodbye. Ron walked up to Harry and after a moments slight hesitation he embraced his surrogate brother in a more controlled hug then Hermione's had been. He pulled away more quickly then she had too.

"Don't slack on you're Occlumancy training without us." Ron warned, "We'll keep it up too so we can train together again when you get back."

Harry nodded and Ron nodded back. They shook hands seriously before grinning and giving each other manly hugs again.

"Right then," Ron said facing the Grangers and walking toward them determinedly.

"See you soon." Hermione smiled.

"Yeah," Harry smiled sadly wishing he could go with them, "See you soon."

Hermione turned around one last time before leaving the room that had become a second home to her. She looked at Harry and their eyes met. The close of a chapter would begin the minute she stepped through that wooden frame...and Hermione wasn't sure she wanted it to yet. School would begin so strangely without the third member of the trio. Hermione didn't want to leave him. She didn't want this chapter to end yet.

"Hermione," Ron placed his hand on her shoulder.

Hermione ignored him, her eyes asking Harry...her eyes begging him for something she didn't understand. Harry smiled sadly, a smile Hermione was becoming far too accustomed to seeing on his scared face and shook his head. She bit her lower lip and nodded raising her hand in goodbye. Harry mimicked her movement and she turned on her heel and walked quickly out the door. Ron trailing confused behind her.

The bright red train docked at the mysterious 93/4 platform at Kings Cross was a surreal world for the two now fifth year students crossing the barrier. The young trio was a duo and they felt strange

walking across that sea of happy, oblivious people milling around on the concrete. They said goodbye to their respective parents, joked with their respected friends and siblings, and found an empty compartment for themselves in a daze. They sat together in silence waiting for the train to start moving away from London, away from their summer. It wasn't until a prefect in a black school robe with the Ravenclaw crest shoved open the door that the companions even noticed they had been underway.

"You two." The Ravenclaw stated brusquely shoving an envelope into Hermione's hands, "You're expected in the prefect's compartments in ten minutes. Don't ask me why." The prefect held up his hand, "Apparently it's explained in the letter." With that, the young man turned sharply on his heel and left the two adolescents to their questions.

"Well," Hermione frowned after the boy, "He was kind of rude wasn't he?"

"Never mind that," Ron leaned over her, "Open the blasted letter." He looked at her anxiously, "I want to know why it's us their punishing and not my brothers."

Hermione nodded suddenly frowning as she slit open the letter.

The minute she did two shiny pieces of metal tumbled onto the seat between she and Ron. They both stared at the glinting objects with slack jaws and disbelief etched upon their features.

"No--!" Ron exclaimed disbelieving.

"These aren't--?" Hermione asked as she picked one up and examined its golden surface, "They are. Ron they're--!"

"Prefects badge." Ron groaned, "If the twins hear about this--!"

Hermione ignored him as she unfolded the letter within the envelope.

Mister Weasley and Miss Granger, it began:

I am pleased to inform you that the two of you have been chosen to represent your fellow peers as prefects.

"Represent' my arse." Ron muttered gloomily.

The reasoning behind receiving your badges so late was because I believed you had quite enough to worry about at the time these were being sent to the other prefects. I thought you'd have a more pleasant time spent with Harry without having to worry about upcoming rules and duties. I expect the two of you will excel at the responsibility I have placed upon you. So without further ado: congratulations, and welcome back.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Ron and Hermione stared gloomily at each other after reading the letter.

"Welcome back' he says." Ron growled.

For once Hermione agreed quite heartily with her red headed friend.

Ginny smirked at her older brother and his best friend as Hermione and Ron dropped into her compartment exhausted. The two wore the shiny golden badges on their robes and Ron was sporting a tuft of green hair. Ginny raised an eyebrow as she stared at the badges.

"Green hair becomes you." She stated causing Neville to look up curiously.

"Sod off Ginny." Ron groaned.

A tired grin graced Hermione's face at Ron's expense as Neville looked at the two of them curiously.

"You guys are the new prefects?" He asked.

He was surprised when both prefects' faces darkened considerably at his question.

"No Neville," Hermione rolled her eyes.

"We're the bloody MoM's," Ron finished sarcastically, "What do you think this is?" He gestured to the badge on his chest.

High pitched laughter sounded from the corner of the compartment by the window alerting Hermione and Ron to another occupant within the compartment. Two of the widest eyes Hermione had ever seen were staring at Ron in mirth over an upside-down magazine. Blond hair fell around the head framing the eyes and making them appear that much bigger.

Ginny laughed at the two prefects' dumfounded expressions as they stared at the strange girl with open mouths, "Um," She smiled bemused, "This is Luna Lovegood. She's a Ravenclaw Student in my year."

"Erm—," Ron stated intelligently, "Pleased to meet you..."

The girl burst out in laughter again for apparently no reason. Ron looked incredulously at Hermione and glanced at Neville as if asking for help. The timid boy could only shrug in response.

Hermione watched the Ravenclaw as she abruptly stopped laughing and looked suddenly in Hermione's direction with an unnerving intensity Hermione hadn't expected.

"You're the one in the Library all of the time." She stated matter-of-factly.

"Yes." Hermione answered cautiously.

"A pity," Luna shook her head, "It seems that even with all that time spent around paper the Snorkrots have still gotten to you."

"What?" Ron asked confused and Luna's intense gaze turned on him.

"Hmm..." She said, "It seems they are contagious."

"Contagious?" Ron asked suddenly worried, "What's contagious? What are Snorkrots?"

"Their not real Ron," Hermione sighed, "Don't worry about it."

Luna shook her head sadly in the corner but otherwise not commenting. Thankfully the strange girl turned her attention back to the upside-down book in her fingers. The presence of the girl in the compartment was kind of unnerving to Hermione the rest of the trip was tense. It seemed that no matter what Ron said he held the uncanny ability to make Luna Lovegood burst out laughing so he ended up keeping his mouth shut for the rest of the trip.

Hermione got around to explaining the reason for Ron's strangely colored hair it had been a first year accident when they were trying to show off in their compartment. It had been Ron and Hermione's privilege to remind the first years that they weren't supposed to do magic on the train. The first year boy who had been showing off had been startled by Ron and Hermione and he had ended up losing control of the spell he was trying to use. Thus a green patch now adorned the right side of Ron's hair.

"Couldn't you have Hermione fix it?" Neville asked as he stared at what looked like a cactus in his lap.

"She tried." Ron deadpanned.

A new wave of laughter from the corner had him sigh and snap his mouth shut. Hermione looked at the hidden face of Luna in annoyance and grudging respect. It was bloody difficult to get Ron to shut his mouth and all this strange girl had to do was open hers. While it was annoying, there were times Hermione would give anything to get the red head to shut up.

Still, she had to pity the poor boy, for it seemed the strange girl held an equally strange crush on him. To this thought Hermione smirked. Ron, noticing her grin, only groaned in sudden foreboding.

It was going to be one of those years.

The great hall was silent as the returning students stared at the sorting hat in confusion and a small bit of fear. What the poem meant was circling through the amassed minds of the children and teachers that were assembled. Hermione scanned the top table and narrowed her eyes at the plump, flat faced little woman seated primly to the left of Dumbledore. She was the only one who did not seem severely affected by the Hat's ominous warning. The hat itself seemed to have shifted slightly with the rip at the brim tilted toward the toad-ish female as though watching the woman suspiciously.

Was she the reason for the strange message? Or was it perhaps the war that had the Hat worried. Hermione patiently waited watching events as they unfolded. Fate answered her query as Dumbledore introduced her and the short amphibian stood expectantly. Her beady eyes graced the hall and with a strange little "Hem, hem." The teachers and students turned their unwilling eyes onto this intruder of tradition.

The Toad's speech dragged itself across the ancient stones of the castle and soon it seemed only Hermione was left actually paying attention. Her chocolate eyes narrowed as she watched the woman's painted lips stretch back and fourth across her wide wrinkled face. Hermione hooked the woman's gratingly high-pitched voice to her photographic memory for later evaluation. Hermione picked apart each word, each hidden innuendo within the phrases and began to piece together a message.

The Ministry of Magic was extending its hand into Hogwarts territory.

"But why?" Hermione muttered to herself as she reviewed the speech several times more before Ron nudged her and alerted her to the food that was in front of her.

"Oi," Ron waved a hand in front of her face, "Anyone in there?" He chuckled.

Hermione shoved his hand away from her face, "Not now Ron."

Ron frowned, "You need to eat sometime Hermione."

Hermione looked at the food in surprise for a moment before robotically filling her plate and once again reviewing the information that, "Professor Umbridge" had purposefully given them.

"First the Hats song," She muttered between bites of some Turkey, "And now this..."

"Yeah," Ron asked beside her, "What was with the hat today huh?"

"It was trying to send a message Ron," Hermione explained not even glancing in Ron's directions as her mind worked, "It was telling us hard times are coming and that we have to unite together if we want Hogwarts to survive."

Ron snorted, "Unite," he glared over at the Slytherin table, "Yeah, right."

"I think its good advice..." Hermione stated absently, "Even if it is a bit far fetched."

"So admit it's not possible?" Ron asked as he shoved some pudding into his mouth.

"I never said that," Hermione frowned as she looked around the hall, "I just think we should put fourth more of an effort."

"I will when the Slytherins will." Ron stated stubbornly.

"Of course," Hermione rolled her eyes, "because they're soooo different from you."

Ron nodded in agreement not realizing his dear friend was being sarcastic. Hermione rolled her eyes again and glanced down in Ginny's direction. The youngest Weasley caught her eyes and shrugged. Hermione smiled back grimly and looked once again to the head table. The Staff was decidedly tense, Hermione noticed. They all seemed to eat carefully and sit tensely. Well, all of them except for Dumbledore. The old man seemed to actually be holding a deep conversation with the Umbridge woman and beside him McGonagall sat tight lipped and suspicious.

On a hunch Hermione glanced at the other house tables. The Slytherins either glared at her or pretended she didn't exist, the Hufflepuffs seemed oblivious to the tension of the rest of the Hall and The Gryffindors were really a mix of the other two houses. It was the subdued way the Ravenclaws ate and the way they kept glancing up at the head table warily that had Hermione wondering who else had caught on to Umbridge's little speech. The older year students seemed to be discussing the events amongst themselves while most of the house was basically like everyone else. For the most part they

were ignoring the odd occurrences in favor of catching up with their friends and their stomachs.

It was the site of Luna Lovegood staring intensely at the toad-like woman that surprised Hermione. It was a deeper stare than Hermione had been exposed to on the train and it was one that gave chills to Hermione's spine.

There was one more Puzzle Hermione would have to solve. What was it about Luna Lovegood that had Hermione so shaken?

Hermione spent the rest of the evening in silence as she allowed the exhausting day to sink in. She did her prefect duties and wrote to Harry in a daze and at last fell into her troubled dreams with little difficulty despite her racing thoughts. She missed Harry and she was worried. Something about the start of this year simply felt wrong to Hermione and she didn't like how that left her feeling.

Perhaps things would be more clear in the morning.

Sorry this took forever to write... But I've got to let you know, I really hated this chapter. Really, really hated it. But it was necessary so it had to be done. So I apologize if it seemed at all rushed or just really weak. I really struggled with it.

I can't wait to get the next chapter up. That one will be fun to write! So yay this chapter is DONE, yay I can get on with the NEXT ONE! And yes I just did what I hate by using capitol letters to express excitement!

Ugh, I need to go to bed.

-Red

The Sinister Witch

The sun began to peak through the small window of a hospital bedroom where a restless child slept fretfully. His gangly body was spread haphazardly over the thin mattress and the white sheets were bunched up and wrapped around a pair of heavily scarred feet. Every once in a while the child, just turned fifteen, would twitch violently. His marred face would tense up and his hands would clench the fabric underneath his fingertips. His pale lips moved soundlessly and often as though he were chanting some unknown incantation.

In his dream, he was searching for something. Something in a white corridor filled with doors. His forehead throbbed terribly, but in his sleep the child was oblivious to the pain. Only when he woke up would the young man know that this haunting dream was not of his creation.

The door to the hospital room creaked open and a slender black heeled foot stepped silently into the white room. The edge of a dark burgundy fabric brushed the top of the second black heel as a woman dressed in elegant robes stepped in as silent as a wraith. Cold grey eyes surveyed the three empty beds and the space the room provided calculatingly. Long black hair riddled with grey was pulled back into a tight bun with only a few rebel strands gracing the back of a long slender neck. The short yet slender woman wore no jewelry, but she held an air of earthly beauty about her like a cloak.

The elderly woman walked into the room with a silent grace that spoke of confidence and skill. She quickly moved to the single occupied bed and surveyed the troubled boy still sleeping. She found the child's trunk at the foot of his bed with all of his belongings packed and ready to go. A small amused smile flitted across her face as she fingered the worn wood. The trunk showed the boy's impatience to be out of the hospital. The young were always impatient.

Her grey eyes then fell on the cane that leaned against the bed by the child's head. The black ornate shaft of the cane lured her closer so that she could better inspect it. She leaned in and opened her eyes more fully watching dark red runes weave along the surface of the cane. She raised an eyebrow in surprise as she read the ancient language that scrolled along the surface and glanced at the boy in a slight amount of excitement.

So he would be impatient, but he held a great amount of potential. Any person who could hold such a cane would be invaluable to the magical world. If she could harvest that potential then the boy would truly be a force to be reckoned with. Perhaps he'd even be as great as the sorcerers of old.

The woman was suddenly very pleased with her choice to help train the boy. So she would sit and watch his aura as he slept to see where she would need to begin, for it was in ones sleep that the aura fully manifested its natural rhythm for others to see. What she found as she watched his difficult sleep was troublesome. It explained the wheel chair on the other side of the child's bed and the unrest in the boy's magic. The child's magic was being blocked at the lowest chakra point, his tail bone, preventing the natural flow of his energy and thus preventing the flow of his magic. It was hindering his movement and stifling his magical core. If something wasn't done about it quickly then the child's limited ability to stand would dwindle and his magic would either explode or it would deteriorate.

The woman frowned, it seemed now would be a good time to wake him up.

"Harry Potter." She stated quietly, lacing her words with a gentle pull to gain the boy's subconscious curiosity, "Wake up." She commanded this time extending her aura to his and pulling at it.

Harry woke up instantly. She was pleased to feel that his first instinct was to feel out her magic. She let him gage her intentions patiently.

She was glad that she wouldn't have to teach him such a simple trick. Her excitement at finding a worthy pupil rose.

"Who are you?" he asked cautiously ignoring the headache from his dream for cautions sake.

"I am Professor Sinestra you're new tutor, in a sense." She stated evenly carefully keeping her aura out so that he could see that she was speaking the truth.

She noticed that now that the boy's magic was active he had the potential of a bomb. He would blow up without thinking about it if he viewed her as any sort of a threat. His magic was wild, untamed, violent, and trapped. Not a good combination.

"You're the Teacher Albus mentioned," Harry nodded seeming to find her trustworthy enough.

"I am much more then a Teacher Harry," Professor Sinestra smiled, "I am going to become you're mentor, you're personal trainer, you're Sensei, and in some cases you're master. Because of the nature of your magic and your injuries I am going to have to put you through much more then simple tutoring. You're magic has been changed and it is being blocked. Most likely by one of you're many injuries. This is dangerous not only for you but for anyone you ever come into contact with. A lot of your muscle tissue has been depleted. I will work with you to change that."

"Why is that important?" Harry inquired.

Sinestra smiled. Excellent, he was testing her knowledge.

"It is important because the performance of your body directly affects the performance of your magic." Sinestra began explaining, "If you're body is not strong, you're magic will not be either. You're case is a little different in the fact that you're magic is strong but you're body

can not currently handle the power of the magic. It is uncontrollable right now. So if we wish to control your magic we have to strengthen you're body. Only when your body is equal to your magic can we truly begin the real training."

Harry nodded all ready soaking in her words, "You mentioned the title 'Sensei'..." He stated uncertainly.

Professor Sinestra smiled eerily and Harry wondered suddenly if the name 'Sinestra' were more of a title.

"Child," She leaned in and lowered her voice, "I spent half of my life training under great Sorcerers, shamans, Magicians, and Wizards in many different parts of the world. What I will teach you is not going to be easy. It will be painful and often frustrating, but I can guarantee that the end result will be more then rewarding. You will be confident, powerful, and a true warrior. I am no fool Mr. potter. I know there is a war brewing, and I know that you are somehow to be at the heart of the conflict. I will become you're teacher and master in order to help you survive. Sensei is a Japanese term for teacher that demands a respect given to that of a king. You will either respect me now or learn respect the hard way. Sensei is how I want you to refer to me. Understand?"

Harry nodded, "I think I do."

"Excellent." Sinestra grinned.

"So when do we begin Sensei?" Harry asked curiously.

Sinestra stood her robes swishing as she surveyed the small room of the hospital muttering incantations under her breath. She began to wave her hand lazily in the air her grey eyes narrowed in concentration. Harry watched a mahogany aura build around her concentrating at her fingertips as she focused the magic to her will. She made a few simple looking hand gestures and the mahogany

glow that was around her fingers expanded outwards forcing the unoccupied beds into the quickly expanding walls. The room itself grew from a small hospital room only able to support a few beds to a massive great hall with vaulted ceilings and a single large window.

Harry soon found himself sitting in his bed in the middle of what could be considered a cathedral. His mouth hung open in amazement as he looked at his new teacher. She had done all of this without uttering a word or waving a wand.

"Your first lesson on magic is that the word 'magic' is an inaccurate way to describe the force that Wizards pull on." Sinestra stated without turning to look at him.

"What?" Harry asked surprised, "If it's not magic then what is it?"

At this Madam Sinestra turned frowning, "Is it not obvious Mr. Potter?" She asked, "Can you not see the energies of the world through your right eye?"

"Well yeah..." He looked at her suspiciously, "But how did you...?"

"Know?" Sinestra finished chuckling, "I knew the minute you opened you're eyes. Your right eye did not focus on me but it was focusing on something within me. You can see my core with your right eye as clearly as you can see how many fingers I can hold up with your left can't you?"

Harry frowned, "Yeah..."

"You'll get used to it." Sinestra smiled grimly, "So then." She continued, "You can see that magic is much more than what Wizards make it out to be. It is not as simple as the word 'magic' implies."

"I don't think I'm following what you're saying," Harry stated.

"For Humans it creates our souls and our life force." Sinestra explained, "Our souls grow out of it, and when we die we will go back to it and be re-created again in a different form."

"So magic is...a god?" Harry asked confused.

Sinestra laughed, "No Mr. Potter, it is not nearly so simple as being a god or as being some higher form of consciousness...It is so much more than that." She paused trying to think of an easier way to explain her mind, "In every culture there is a different name for it. Some call it the Orisha, others call it Nirvana, and then to some it is Moksha...It is everything and everywhere. It is the force that pulls and moves the Universe...Magic is reality and when wizards and sorcerers manipulate magic they are really manipulating the reality of the world they are in."

Harry sat still, contemplating her words in his mind, "I think that makes a little sense." He muttered.

"Does it really?" Sinestra asked bemused, "How does it make sense?"

Harry looked up startled, "Well...it just does." He shrugged, "It matches with what I can see when I look around the room." He turned his head around the enlarged room, "When I looked around this room before you tampered with it...The magic in the air, in the furniture in everything that I saw was moving in a slow steady pattern...but after you tampered with it...the patterns are different, the pace is faster, brighter than it was before...It's denser too but at the same time lighter...Does that make sense?"

"Only to a person who can see what you can see." Sinestra smiled, "Normally it takes a master years of study and trials to gain what your right eye can now do naturally. Count yourself lucky on that one child." She placed her hand on her knee as she regarded her new pupil, "So what, based off of what you can see, has happened to the

reality of this room?"

Harry thought carefully before answering, "The room has..." He began looking at the magic he could see carefully, "Changed...you changed the reality of the space?" Harry looked up worriedly, "But how? How can you change reality?"

Sinestra shook her head, "You cant' change reality, you can create it, you can destroy it and you can bend it but you can't completely change it. This is the only limitation that you will ever find in manipulating magic. In Alchemy you can not create cheese from a piece of rock because the properties of the cheese are so completely different from the rock. The atoms are too different; the make up of the rock is too far from the nutrients in the cheese. Trying to do so would be changing the basic make up of reality. This can damage the world's reality too greatly to reverse."

Sinestra gestured to the new space of the room, "What I did was add to the reality we are in." She grinned ruefully, "I bent the rules, so to speak. What you need to understand is that while reality is basically an untouchable concept, magic is not."

"Huh?" Harry asked intelligently.

"The magic that humans are able to manipulate is the physical manifestation of our Reality." Sinestra explained, "Our bodies are a part of that physical manifestation so we are able to feel and even use the magic around us..."

"You mean...we're part of reality?" Harry asked thinking how obvious that sounded.

"Yes...and no." Sinestra sighed, "What I am trying to impress is that we are not separate from the world, magic, or reality. We are as much a part of it as it is a part of us. There is no separation between our souls and the magic we manipulate. Everything and everyone is

connected. It is how we can manipulate magic because we are all ready so much a part of it. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yes." Harry said confidently.

"Good." Sinestra smiled, "Then you'll understand when I tell you that your magical core is in direct correspondence with the performance of your body."

"Kind of..." Harry frowned, "I get that it's connected but I'm not sure what you're trying to tell me."

Sinestra sighed trying to remember what it was like when her first Sensei had been trying to explain the theory of Magical reality to her too. He had been a Japanese master trying to explain eastern philosophy to a young girl who was rooted in western theology. It had been dreadfully confusing until he simply got to the point of the lecture and showed her how things corresponded in a more literal sense. She looked at the boy in front of her quizzically. Perhaps she'd have to do the same with him.

"Your magic is blocked Mr. Potter," she stated bluntly smiling grimly as the boy looked up at her startled.

"You've said that before...But I am confused as to what you mean." He asked.

"Somehow your energy clotted at a vital point in your body." She frowned, "It is why you have random bursts of fire and more importantly why you can't walk."

"Magic can clot?" Harry asked worriedly.

"Yes your magic can clot. Just like blood can." Sinestra sighed, perhaps the direct approach hadn't been the best approach, "In order for your body to function correctly your energy needs to be able to

flow throughout your body smoothly. I don't know the exact extent of your injuries but somewhere along the way something in you're injuries blocked a location in your tail bone, effectively paralyzing your legs and allowing your magic to build a clot which, in essence, blocked the flow of your energy."

"So that's why I can't walk...?" Harry asked, "And why I've made no progress in my physical therapy?"

"Yes." Sinestra nodded, "among other things."

"What other things?" Harry asked.

"The erratic way the fire in your blood randomly decides to explode is another example." Sinestra sighed, "And the longer it is blocked the more erratic you're magic will become, as well as more dangerous." Sinestra's cold grey irises stared into Harry's multi-colored eyes with unnerving intensity, "You are a time bomb Mr. Potter." Harry felt chills fall down his spine at her words, "Your magic will build and build until it does one of two things: It either explodes obliterating everything within whatever distance your magic is powerful enough to reach as well as yourself...Or, it will slowly disintegrate, which means a slow and painful death for you."

"Either way it will kill me." Harry stated stoically.

Madam Sinestra nodded, "Unless we can un-block the clot and return you're life force to its natural flow."

"How do we unblock it?" Harry asked immediately.

The grim smile that Harry was becoming accustomed to seeing spread sinisterly across His new Sensei's face, "It will be painful," The elder witch whispered, "It will be unlike any pain you have ever experienced."

"I can handle pain." Harry stated seriously.

Madam Sinestra 'Hmm'ed in response inwardly proud of the choice she had made in a pupil. The fifteen year old child was gaining her respect, and that was a very difficult thing to do. He did not boast when he said he could handle it, just stated a simple fact. That kind of simple honesty spoke of experience. Sinestra began to wonder at what exactly transpired during his summer for such a young boy to have the haunted understanding of a war veteran.

"Well then," Madam Sinestra quietly intoned, "Shall we begin?"

Harry nodded and scooted toward the edge of his bed, "I'm ready."

His green and gold eyes stared stonily into the cold woman's face as she shook her head, "You think you're ready?" She chuckled humorlessly, "If you come out of this sane...then I'll be impressed."

Harry laughed harshly, "Sane?" He asked, "I haven't been truly sane since the first attempt on my life in first year...after three months of hiding and torture can you honestly expect my mind to be anything but a mess?" He clutched the bed shaking as memories he was in the process of repressing reared up into his mind, "As far as pain goes, I'll be surprised if it even matches what I've been through."

Ah, Sinestra thought, here was the crutch, the flaw in the child's otherwise noble character. He was obsessed with the past. She could see it in those words. He was constantly reliving his nightmares and running from them by embracing extremely difficult challenges. Sinestra would even go so far as to say the boy was slightly masochistic if not inadvertently suicidal. He was so set on surviving that he wasn't even aware that he would throw himself head first into a lethal situation if only for the rush of the danger and pain accompanying. This could be a very dangerous trait for those he was close to, and it was one she'd have to beat out of him. A hard lesson would have to be learned to push him out of such dangerous habits.

She'd have to be extremely creative to pass the lesson on.

"Do not think you're past has prepared you for this." Sinestra hissed dangerously as she grabbed Harry by the collar and surprised him by holding him up to her face effortlessly, "The worst thing you could ever do is underestimate anything or anyone. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded as he struggled; fire began to rise out of his skin to attack his offender. She dropped him back onto the bed and Harry winced.

"Strip." She ordered as she turned around and walked to the center of the large space.

"Strip?" Harry asked.

"Take you're robe off or it will be destroyed." She turned and raised an eyebrow, "You're not modest are you?"

Harry frowned, he wasn't particularly...but this woman was new to him and he didn't want to feel vulnerable around her.

"Why would my hospital robe be destroyed?" Harry asked skirting the subject of his modesty.

Sinestra noticed he was ignoring her earlier question as she smirked in the child's direction, "You're fire will destroy it within the first minute of the ritual." She turned back to the center and leaned down producing a piece of chalk.

She began to draw a wide Mandela with alternating symbols and lines representing the elements and cardinal directions. Behind her Harry grudgingly pulled off his hospital gown as he watched her work. He fidgeted as he waited; the cold air caressed his pale skin causing goose pimples to rise beneath his scars. Professor Sinestra stood gracefully and pocketed the chalk absentmindedly. She turned with a

critical gaze as she surveyed the full extent of the boy's damage. She frowned and walked over toward his fidgeting form.

"Your injuries are all spell wrought are they not?" She asked as she placed a hand on the bed.

Harry nodded not looking at the woman, "Mostly." He stated.

"Hmm..." Sinestra's frown deepened, "Knife wounds and a few rapier..."

Harry looked up startled, "You can tell just by looking?"

"I can." She nodded, "And soon so will you if I have anything to say about it. Now I'm going to pick you up so don't be alarmed."

Harry was alarmed when she actually did lift him. The older woman didn't look as though she could lift much but she picked Harry up with an ease that bespoke of a great amount of physical strength.

Madam Sinestra carefully placed Harry into the middle of the circle she had drawn with the chalk. She helped Harry roll over onto his stomach in a way that wouldn't smudge any of her carefully drawn lines and then began pressing various pressure points along his spine. Harry was silent as he listened to her muttering the names of various runes and elements in an ancient Celtic tongue. The air around them swirled in dazzling colors of light and the chalk glowed eerily to Harry's eyes. He recognized no taint of darkness in the magic that was being called upon so he relaxed more fully as the woman's chanting grew in volume.

Just as Harry's eyes began to droop from the relaxing procedure Madam Sinestra touched a point in his lower back that caused a sharp pain to run up his spine. Another tap lower on his back caused Harry's body to convulse. The colors and chalk grew brighter almost becoming blinding to Harry's sensitive golden eye. Harry clenched

his teeth as the pain in his lower back began to grow. His knuckles turned white as he tried to focus on the dancing dust that Harry identified as magic. Soon even his green eye could see the glowing chalk inches from his pale face. The pain began to course through his body in a rhythm like the rise and fall of waves. A cold, callused finger pressed into Harry's tailbone and Harry's world turned white.

Professor Sinestra quickly positioned the boy so that he lay on his back as terrible screams tore their way out of his throat. Fire ripped out of the child's skin and danced at the edges of the inner circle as Sinestra calmly walked out of the enclosure.

She sat calmly at the eastern point of the ritualistic circle never breaking her chanting as her eyes were locked to the writhing form of the-boy-who-lived. His hands and his feet were now the only parts of his body that were touching the ground. The rest of Harry's body was suspended in an arch above the floor. His numerous scars glowed red underneath the flames that danced inches off of his skin. His eyes, both of which glowed a separate color, were as wide as eyes could go. His mouth mimicked his eyes as he screamed. A wave of fire exploded from his body and hit the walls of the magical diagram beneath him running up to the ceiling in an angry plume of heat. A second wave had the glowing symbols surrounding Harry flicker for a second.

Madam Sinestra felt a bead of sweat fall down the side of her face as she steadied the wards. The Runes she had placed on Harry's back began to glow and detach themselves from the surface of his skin. They floated beneath him for a moment before the swirled around him blurring into deep mahogany lines that crisscrossed and circled Harry's body.

Sinestra noticed a sickly green line begin to form out of Harry's forehead. She narrowed her eyes and extended her aura carefully touching the now visible ribbon that connected the child to the Dark Lord. A burning sensation traveled into her mind for a moment upon

contact with the ribbon. Without pausing in her chant she reached for it again. She could not risk the Dark Lord using her pupils sudden open soul to his advantage. She mentally grabbed the string with both hands gasping at the hate and anger forcing itself into her when her mental fingers wrapped around it.

She paused in her chant, the runes moving around Harry slowing to a pause to mimic their castor. She growled shoving the foreign feelings away from her awareness as she crossed the hands holding the line and pulled the green rope taught into a not. The pain abruptly stopped on one side of the line, the color went dull. She let go and grinned in satisfaction before continuing where she had left off in her chant.

Her palms were severely burned but it was nothing that wouldn't heal with time and proper treatment. She finished the ceremony with a sharp scream and watched in satisfaction as the runes around Harry broke and the boy fell to the floor unconscious. His fire disappeared and the wind that had kicked up around him stilled.

Sinestra stood shakily and closed her eyes to better balance herself. She waved her burned right hand lazily returning the space to its original size and appearance. She carefully picked up the limp child placing him in his bed before cleaning up the chalk and turning out the lights. That was enough lesson for one day she thought as she slowly left the room in search of a healer. Harry would probably need a few days to recuperate but, she smiled, at least his dreams would be his for a little while. She may have blocked the unholy link that connected the dark lord temporarily but she figured Harry wouldn't mind the intrusion.

If anyone is confused I apologize and I will do my best to answer any questions sent my way. To clarify a few things I have spent most of my life researching other cultures and their ideas concerning magic or their religions. I tried to combine more ancient ideas of magic with tribal and modern ideas. I hope it worked. This is where I got most of my inspiration for Sinestra's explanation of magic in this chapter. I

hope it wasn't too confusing for all of my readers and I hope you all enjoyed it.

-Red

Trial and Err

Harry awoke for the first time in months without a lingering horror clinging to the corner of his mind. He was exhausted and still in great amounts of pain but this was nothing new to him. What was relatively new was the large black furry nostril shoving itself into Harry's face sniffing wildly. Harry opened his gold eye immediately recognizing Sirius's neon-blue tint surrounding the muzzle and the amused yet haunted gray eyes of his godfather in a black doggy face.

"Ugh." Was Harry's oh so intelligent response to Sirius's wake up call, "Sirr'us, wha are you--?"

The dog began wagging his tail enthusiastically and the creature's mouth opened in excitement dousing Harry with first rate "doggy breath".

"Augh!" Harry shoved his arms weakly at his godfather, "Gross!"

Laughter made itself known as Harry shoved the offending muzzle out of his scarred face. His nose was scrunched up in disgust and he glared at the dog that was giving Harry a very unbelievable innocent look.

"You need to brush you're teeth." Harry informed the hound.

A snort to Harry's left had him staring at the tired face of Remus Lupin, a not so young werewolf that had aged long before he had matured. The worn man smiled at Harry and Sirius as he gently shut the book he had been reading. His face was pale and marked with a few new scars which made Harry realize the full moon had come and gone not too long ago. Harry decided that he really needed to get a calendar in the hospital room. The passage of time didn't really register in the sterile white room.

"Get off him Sirius," Remus smiled, "Let him wake up naturally for

once."

The large grim jumped off the hospital bed and changed back to his haunted human form. Immediately after the transformation from animal to man was complete he rounded on Harry encasing the sore boy into a bone-crushing hug.

"I was worried you wouldn't wake up again pup." Sirius intoned against Harry.

"Er—," Harry gasped, "That's all dandy but could you let me breathe?"

"Ah!" Sirius abruptly let his charge go with a sheepish grin on his face, "Sorry Harry."

Harry rubbed the back of his neck tenderly and slowly drew himself up into a sitting position, "Why'd you think I wouldn't wake?" He asked the two older men groggily.

Remus looked at Sirius and Sirius did likewise. They seemed to be conversing to each other without words and on a level of communication not seen. Harry knew that kind of conversation; it was something he did instinctually with Hermione and Ron. It showed a deep bond of friendship between the two men Harry was sure he'd have seen with his parents and the two marauders had they been alive.

"Harry," Remus said carefully, "You've been asleep for a week."

Harry stared at the old werewolf in disbelief, "A week?" he asked, "You're joking right?"

"I wish I were pup." Sirius stated solemnly.

"A week!" Harry exclaimed incredulously shaking his head, "Just

what did that woman do to me?" He asked the two marauders.

"That woman' saved you're life." A cold voice sounded behind him.

Harry flinched as he turned his head over to look at the cold grey gaze of his instructor. Sirius snickered and Remus wore a nostalgic expression of bemusement. Harry resisted the temptation to groan piteously.

"That woman' also came each day for a week to check up on you're condition and make sure everything was going smoothly," Professor Sinestra deadpanned, "Though she is wondering whether or not it was worth it to help so ungrateful a pupil."

Harry grimaced ashamed and looked down at his lap properly cowed.

"I'm sorry Madam Sinestra," Harry apologized weakly, "I didn't mean any disrespect."

"Oh?" Sinestra asked raising a single eyebrow at the young boy who had recovered a great deal better then she had expected him too from the ritual, "Just how sorry are you young mister Potter?"

Sirius snorted and looked at Remus, "This is beginning to look awfully familiar isn't it?"

Remus nodded, "Indeed," he grinned, "I can recall you and James in similar positions with a very similar professor."

Harry glared at the two, "I don't see either of you helping me out," He muttered angrily.

"I can hear every word you say Mister Potter and if you're godfathers insist on interfering they won't be able to help you." Sinestra stated calmly.

Harry had the privilege of watching two men flinch in fear at the older woman's words as old school habits over ruled their adult sense and they immediately shut their mouths like trained monkeys. He would have laughed had Sinestra's gaze found it's attention on him once again.

"Well then," Sinestra grinned, "If you are well enough to complain then I do believe you are recovered enough to begin."

"Begin what?" Harry asked feeling as though a dead weight were beginning to form in the pit of his stomach.

"You're training." The older woman grinned sinisterly.

Harry shuddered at that look. His professor looked as though she were regarding a rather juicy looking stake as she grinned at him. He was beginning to regret insulting her.

Harry looked at Remus and Sirius pleadingly. Both adults just smiled and shook their heads at him.

Sirius placed his hand on Harry's shoulder smiling gently, "Don't worry pup," He said, "Remus and I will be right here all day to make sure she doesn't do anything too horrible to you."

Harry scowled, "Coward," He muttered.

Sirius leaned forward until his face was inches from Harry's ear, "Have you ever seen that woman in a temper?" He shuddered and pulled away.

Harry snorted at the same time as Madam Sinestra in response to Sirius's statement. Harry looked at the lady in surprise and she raised an eyebrow in response.

"Well?" She asked impatiently, "Are you going to get out of bed or do I have to drag you out?"

Harry looked at the woman uncomprehendingly, "Get out?" He asked, "On my own?"

"Yes Harry," Sinestra smiled, "On your own."

Harry looked at each of his godfathers respectively and they immediately stood beside his bed ready to support him if he needed it.

Sinestra shook her head at the two men, "No boys," She walked over to Harry handing him the cane that Sirius had given him for his birthday, "This is something Harry must do on his own. I'm not asking you to walk yet, just to get out of bed and learn to stand on your own weight."

Harry grasped the ruby cap of the cane in his right palm feeling the strangely warm stone press against his skin as he placed it on the ground on the side of his bed. He slowly swung his legs over the side and scooted forward wincing slightly. It still hurt a bit to bend his legs and he was still sore from the ordeal he just went through.

He was surprised as he placed first his right foot then his left squarely on the tile and lifted himself off the bed with little pain. He clutched the cane as his body shook from the unfamiliar feeling of standing without a walker and he looked up terrified as he felt his knees begin to buckle beneath him.

Immediately two strong hands grasped Harry beneath his arms steadying him as he slowly found his center of balance; his godfathers had reacted on instinct when they'd noticed their god-child tremble precariously. They let go when they felt Harry had a hold of himself and stepped back a bit so the scarred boy could figure out the feeling of standing on his own.

Sinestra watched Harry with approving eyes staring not at the boy but at the energy flows around him. The Chakra point at his tail bone was open and working as it should. The child's magic was still wild and unbalanced but it was flowing more sedately then it had and it would be easier to bend and to train.

She looked at the magic more fully and noticed with surprise two more elements unveiled beneath the fire. It was nearly unheard of to see more then two elements favoring one human being. The elements were generally temperamental and possessive of the ones they chose to harbor and rarely shared. It was a rare individual indeed who played host to more then even one element. Especially when that element was fire as the flame was the most temperamental of all of the natural elements and carried more of a possessive nature about it then most. She smiled in ironic humor. One more challenge to overcome with the boy.

Harry Potter looked up at his instructor grinning foolishly as he held himself up. He was amazed at how difficult it still was to simply hold himself up. If Harry hadn't been clutching the cane between his fingers as he was doing the tragic boy feared he would have fallen within an instant of placing his feet firmly on the ground.

"Good, good..." Madam Sinestra muttered as she gracefully walked toward him, "Eventually you will be able to stand on your own without the need of the cane. Not today though." She assured Harry as his eyes widened in sudden panic.

Harry calmed down and Sinestra motioned him toward the bed. The young man took the hint and carefully sat down on the mattress behind him.

"We will begin re-building the muscles in you're back first and then we will move on to you're legs." She stated to Harry glancing at Sirius and Remus, "In fact, I will teach these exercises to you're godfathers

as well so that they will be able to help you out while I am not here."

The two men nodded.

"Sirius," Sinestra motioned the dark man towards the bed, "If you would so kindly stand on this side of the bed. Harry will need help executing these exercises for the first week or so...at least until his muscles build up properly. So I am counting on you and Remus to do exactly as I will show you."

Remus nodded and stood next to Sirius on the side of Harry's bed.

"Now you Harry," Sinestra nodded to the sitting boy, "I'll need you to lay on you're back on the bed please."

Harry immediately complied laying down onto his back on the mattress.

"Good," Sinestra nodded in approval, "Now I need you to try to lift you're right leg as high as it will go."

Harry nodded and concentrated as he slowly began to lift his leg off the bed. The upper portion of his body lifted as well and Madam Sinestra had to push the boy's chest down to prevent him from using his neck.

"One of you will need to make sure the rest of his body doesn't move," Sinestra said to Sirius and Remus, "The other will need to help Harry push his legs higher when he reaches his limit."

She demonstrated by placing her palm on Harry's suspended shaking ankle and pushing upwards slowly. Harry clenched his teeth as Sinestra pushed his legs up until they stiffened. Then she slowly placed her other hand beneath his knee pushing the knee up and bending the leg. Harry grunted from the dull pain but otherwise made no other indication that it hurt. Sinestra held his leg in that position for

a full count of ten seconds before straitening it out; pushing it up again and then lowering it back onto the mattress.

"Harry should be able to lift his leg on his own but the bending I want someone to help him with and I'd like one of you to push his legs higher than Harry can lift them." Sinestra instructed, "I'd like you to this for at least every other half hour." She looked at Sirius, "Would you mind staying here with Harry overnight?"

Sirius nodded in affirmative, "Of course I can. He's my Godson."

Sinestra nodded, "I thought as much. The first week is vital to re-building his muscles and we missed that vital time because of the clot." She stared at Harry seriously, "I'm hoping that after re-opening his energy pathways we will be able to catch up."

"Catch up?" Harry asked wondering at the dread building in the pit of his stomach.

Sinestra grinned at Harry and the boy realized he liked it much better when the woman didn't smile. There seemed to be a trend of impending doom that followed those smiles. Harry felt the tell-tale shiver shuffle down his spine that happened every time Sinestra gave him such a positive expression. Somehow it just wasn't positive with her...

Harry relished in the feel of hot water as it cascaded down his naked, battered frame. For the first time in months the young man was able to confidently stand on his own while taking a shower. For the past three weeks Harry Potter had scarcely gotten a break between working with Professor Sinestra on physical and magical therapy and spending time with his loved ones. It had become routine to get out of bed and stand with his cane alternating his weight from one foot to the next for certain lengths of periods at a time. It was nice to have Sirius with Harry almost every day. Getting to know the older man was a treat Harry was happily drinking in.

Harry was finally beginning to notice the marauder blood in himself because of it.

Sinestra drilled him in his entire first year beginning spell casting without a wand. She taught him how to focus his magic and control it to bend the reality around him at will. Occasionally his magic still blew up at him. When it did Sinestra set him to the task of lighting and putting out a candle slowly without even a flick of the wrist.

When he mastered meditation, which was a must in controlling his fire, Dumbledore appeared on the weekends to help him focus his mind and learn occlumancy. It was quite a bit easier to do after Sinestra confessed that she had temporarily clotted the connection between Harry and Tom. Dumbledore had been upset with the woman when he found out that she had literally "tied up" the connection. Apparently once Voldemort was able to untie the knot she had created Harry was going to be in a world of pain and his mind would be utterly vulnerable even with Dumbledore's shield.

Harry had tried to state that this was a rather normal hazard for him and Sinestra had bluntly stated that she was working with him so that it would no longer be common place and that Harry should not on any terms think so casually about pain and vulnerability. Thus after Dumbledore's sad regretful gaze and Molly's motherly, tearful, glomp, (For the Weasley Matriarch was indeed in the room), Harry felt completely and thoroughly chastised and promised he would try not to take such things for granted again.

Still, Harry reflected as he leaned his head back to allow the water to spray directly onto his face in contentment, his recovery was going much better then he had recently thought possible. Sinestra had warned Harry that he may never be able to walk correctly again but that she had a technique that would enable him to use full body movement for a temporary amount of time. In order to achieve this ability she had Harry practicing forcing the majority of his magic into

his legs as she made him work on his physical therapy. It helped a great deal but it was draining to his core and energy and Harry simply didn't have the stamina yet to hold himself within the technique for very long.

It frustrated him sometimes at how difficult it was to call upon his magic and how easy it now was to perform magic accidentally. It was as if Harry's magic had decided that he was no longer in charge of it.

What used to be simple spells had become incredibly difficult to him. Harry found that he had to look at the spell at a completely different angle now as opposed to the simple "swish and flick" of before. He now had to understand the theory and imagery accompanying the spell. He had to understand how it worked, the patterns it created within the air, the runes it used, and how it felt to execute it. There was now so much more thought to a spell and quite a bit more work than there used to be. Sinestra stated that in order to do a spell one had to understand it completely but that thoughts on how the spell worked could completely muddle the concentration and then execution of the spell. It was frustrating and confusing and sometimes Harry found himself wanting to scream at his mentor for no other reason than to get rid of stress. Thus Harry's numerous accidental explosions.

While Harry sat concentrating on his candle Sinestra would chastise and lecture. She'd state that he would get it but that he would not be able to get it until he understood how the spells felt to him once he did one of them...which made no sense to the boy and had him frustrated all over again.

Harry sighed as the water turned off and the male nurse outside the shower curtains passed him a towel through the curtains. Harry regretfully dried off and then grabbed onto the railing as he carefully and slowly made his way out of the shower. The nurse helped him dress into a clean hospital robe and helped Harry into his wheel chair. Harry still wasn't able to walk to his room from the shower room so

he'd be wheeled to and from for just a bit longer.

Harry often complained that he looked more like an old man than a teenage boy just growing into his adolescence with the cane but secretly he was amazed. Even the hobbling gait that Harry was quickly becoming used to was a complete miracle to him. That first week after waking up from the ritual Sinestra had put him through had been filled with pain and very little sleep but Harry had learned and gained a lot from that single week. The next two weeks afterward had been just as eventful. He missed Hermione and Ron terribly but found he was really only able to think of them in the late hours of the night. Sinestra didn't let him think about much except for what she was drilling into him. Harry was grateful for that.

When he reached his room the nurse that had accompanied him to the showers and back waved him farewell and walked off to tend to another patient. Harry amused himself as he watched the male nurse walk away with the information the man had given him. Apparently the main healer that had treated Harry was petitioning to open a dual Muggle/Wizard hospital. She had been talking to the doctor she had worked with on combining the magic and Muggle practices. The doctor had been excited about the prospect causing Harry to shake his head in bemusement.

Still, Harry was wondering how the ministry would take a Muggle/Wizard hospital. He was sure the "Statute of Secrecy" would never allow for the Muggle and Wizard doctors to work together. It was a good thought though.

Harry wheeled himself to his bedside and then pushed himself up onto his bed. He placed the cane in its usual spot up against the bed and then proceeded to pull his legs up to begin the stretches he could now do on his own.

His thoughts then turned to the two pieces of parchment that sat upon his bed. They were letters from Hermione and Ron. He was

baffled by their descriptions of the new defense against the dark arts professor. What Teacher in magic of all things would teach without any hands on experience? Especially concerning an art that needs to be practiced in order to properly learn it! Harry laughed when he had first read about the woman in Ron's letter believing he had been joking until he had read Hermione's description.

He also worried about Hermione's observation of the "Toad-like" woman's attitude. Apparently the Ministry of Magic was overstepping its bounds in Hogwarts. Hermione felt that The Defense teacher was there only to keep an eye on Dumbledore leading Harry to wonder why they would feel they need too. Harry wondered what Albus had done to anger The Prime Minister.

"Excellent." Professor Sinestra's voice cut through Harry's musings as she moved into the room, "I see you are doing you're stretches like I asked."

"Yes Sensei." Harry intoned politely.

"Good," Sinestra nodded as she removed her outer robe revealing a loose-fitting outfit that reminded Harry of a jedi from Star wars yet not totally similar.

The elder woman waved her hand around the room once again changing it to whatever specifications that she had in mind for that day. She did so often enough that Harry was well used to her bending the reality of the room. Today Harry was surprised to feel a breeze caress his skin and the call of bird song. The room had become a wild garden with twisting trees and sharp shrubbery beneath them. The floor had become mossy and wet with morning dew and the sun cast green shadows against the leaves. A stream cut through the room lined with warped and hollowed lime stone. Sinestra sighed heavily as though she was ridding herself of some unwanted ill and she sat down in a lotus position smiling serenely.

"Go ahead," She stated laughingly, "ask your questions. I know you want to."

Harry closed his open mouth and did as he was prompted, "Did you just...transfigure or transport?"

"Neither." Sinestra smiled, "What we are now standing; or in my case sitting, in is similar to what you stood in when you illegally glimpsed Albus's pensieve."

"So I am in a memory?" Harry asked suspiciously, "When did you bring out the pensieve?"

"I said similar did I not?" Sinestra asked bemused, "Such a stupid pupil I have...I had hoped better from the offspring of Lilly Evans."

Harry's face reddened even as he realized she was teasing him.

"No there is no pensieve," Sinestra smiled, "yes this is a place from my memories. We are not in the actual memory but I have placed us in a spot just outside of our own plane of existence. I was taught how to create this place so that I had a spot to think and center myself when I was learning difficult magic. I am using this today so that I can help you learn how to do the same thing. Anything that happens here is the same as what would happen out there but it may be a tad easier to do it here."

"What is 'here' exactly?" Harry asked, "I mean, what do you mean we're in a different plane of existence?"

"What I did, Harry," Sinestra explained, "Was wrap this room in magic. I created a three-dimensional field with magic and built around the reality already placed there using an image from my memory to build the place that I wanted."

At Harry's confused look Sinestra sighed, "Have you ever used a

Muggle Computer?"

Harry nodded, "Yeah, I used them a lot when I was in primary school."

Sinestra nodded, "Good, then have you ever seen a video game on a computer or any Computer animated movies?"

"Excuse me for saying this," Harry held up a hand defensively even as he regarded his instructor critically, "but, you're a witch. How would you know about computer animation?"

Sinestra regarded her charge with amusement, "I make it my business to know about the latest in the outside world. The Muggle's technology is fascinating and for twenty years of my life I lived as one of them...for my own reasons." She stated before Harry asked any more questions about her time as a Muggle, "frankly, I have always enjoyed the Cinemas and the Computer Animation is interesting to watch. Now back to what I was explaining earlier." Harry nodded, "You understand Video games and Computer animation then?"

"Vaguely," Harry stated, "I'm not an expert and I've only really watched my cousin play so I don't really understand them."

"No need to," Sinestra shook her head, "That should be enough for you to understand what I am talking about."

She motioned to the mossy floor beside her and Harry slowly made his way over and sat next to her. She waved her hand in the air again so that the scenery fell away and the two of them were sitting in a dark empty space with brightly colored runes crisscrossing through the air like a three-dimensional grid.

"Now, when you build scenery in a computer you start out with a grid similar to this one correct?" Sinestra instructed.

"I suppose so." Harry nodded.

"This sets up the basic space for the plane." Sinestra stated, "Now, Harry, I want you to imagine a setting. One that is both familiar and comforting."

Harry nodded closing his eyes and thinking carefully over his life. His mind rejected most of his life from his childhood and especially everything from that summer. Even a few places in Hogwarts were thrown out as possible candidates. Comfort was a strange thing to Harry. He hadn't felt it most of his life and most of the places he felt truly comfortable were not ones he could truly call his own. The hospital room was a comfort, but he would not wish to willingly stay there and meditate if he had other options. The Quidditch Pitch was a wonderful place for Harry Potter, but it was also a stressful one. It was hardly a 'comforting' place. The Gryffindor boy's dormitory was almost home, or at least as close as the word came to being and the Common room was the same. Yet neither place screamed "Harry".

Then it came to him, a place that may or may not have ever really been his own. It wasn't exactly a memory...it was more the elements of a place that would make Harry feel at peace.

Sinestra smiled to herself when she noticed Harry's mouth twitch upward into a slight grin. She knew he had found a place that would be both familiar and comforting to him just by that expression. She had worn that expression the last time she had stepped onto the land of her former teacher.

"Now that you have a place," Sinestra softly instructed, "Break it apart. Ignore the forefront of the image and look to the most basic elements of the background. Like the color, the shape, feel, and the materials making up the background. Imagine it to the point where you can feel you're weight push upon the soles of you're feet. Imagine it to the point that you can smell the air or taste the light."

Harry nodded seeping his mind into the image he had created for himself. Cold, grey stones grew beneath his bare feet. His toes felt the rough minerals in the rock. The chill from the cool ground ran up the back of his legs raising goose pimples along his back. A cool breeze that bore the musty scent of forest pines licked and caressed his scarred skin. Different shades of blue crisscrossed the space around and above Harry intermingling and darkening until a black-cerulean sky formed in the magical grid.

"Good," Sinestra stated pleased that Harry had all ready instinctually begun projecting his image, "Now the foreground. What are you standing on? Imagine it and every little detail surrounding it."

The boundaries of the grid dropped into the dark blue. The stone Harry was standing on expanded and dropped down shaping itself into geometric patterns that connected and grew even larger. Harry's face was tense with concentration even as the stones formed the basic layout of the Hogwarts castle. The breeze changed to match the depth of the hollow building. The air turned colder to match the awesome height that Harry and Sinestra now stood.

Sinestra was impressed as even without prompting the stones met dirt and from the dirt grass grew and land expanded away from the boundaries of the castle in seemingly all directions. A wooden pitch formed down below and the lake and forests grew out of the ground behind it. The tips of the ancient pines met the black sky and the world created by Harry began to mend its edges. Even the magic in the air turned and swirled the exact way it would have if Sinestra were standing on the unused south tower in the real Hogwarts. Harry had gotten every detail of the scenery. Sinestra could taste the impending twilight that she was sure would be approaching. Yet it was...to perfect. The scenery was too detailed, the air, too sweet.

The older woman turned to stare at her pupil in pride. This was one of the best landscapes created for a first timer she had seen in years. The boy had a vivid memory and, she glanced at the tower she was

standing on, an excellent imagination. A smile lit her features as she looked at her pupil and then she noticed something very off about his work. The flaw in the boy's otherwise near-perfect image. Where Harry's back was facing a black void dropped off into an infinite nothingness. She smirked for a moment before making her appreciation known.

"Well done Mr. Potter," Sinestra grinned, "Do not open your eyes just yet, I want you to feel what you have created without seeing it so you can make it again."

"Created?" Harry asked as he did as he was instructed, memorizing the feel of the image in his mind, "I didn't do anything..." his argument fell from his lips as he opened his eyes.

Harry's mouth dropped open as the place that he had created in his mind stared him in the face.

"It's quite good," Sinestra complimented, "I don't believe there is a South tower in the actual castle. Nor do I believe there is one quite this tall, but it is a nearly perfect duplication."

"Nearly--?" Harry asked incredulously thinking that what he was seeing was a perfect representation of Hogwarts...minus the tower he was standing on.

"Well for starters," Sinestra tapped the stone parapet and a piece crumbled from the stone railing revealing the hollow space within, "Your materials are all quite weak. I imagine you made this tower up which would be the why. You've never actually stepped foot on this tower. You know it doesn't actually exist. The magic knows this as well and so reflected it to you by using weak material."

Harry nodded silently understanding what she was telling him. It wasn't a real place so Harry couldn't know how strong it would be.

"Another flaw in your creation is that everything you see in front of you is here." Sinestra stated.

"And that's...wrong?" Harry asked confused.

Sinestra smirked at her pupil and crossed her arms in front of her chest, "Look behind you Mr. Potter."

Harry stared at her in confusion for a moment before cautiously turning around. When he witnessed the "black hole" behind him he jumped and yelled startled causing Sinestra to laugh.

"You forgot to imagine what you would find behind you." Sinestra grinned, "A common mistake many have made before your time and one that will be repeated again."

Harry frowned as he regarded the empty space wondering how he had forgotten about it.

"Thankfully you see the ground beneath you as solid and strong," Sinestra smiled, "Or else you would have made a very different mistake. This is a tall tower. I would not have fancied falling through it."

Harry paled at that thought even as Sinestra's eyes sparkled in dark humor.

"My old master used to tell me that the strongest points of each person's different realities are the truest reflections of one's self." Sinestra nodded to the emptiness, "You are a person who continually looks before you and deliberately ignores what is behind you. This is shown through the way everything in front of where you were standing was perfectly constructed but everything behind you was not constructed at all. You try to get away from what is behind you by focusing on what is in front. Am I correct?"

Harry nodded, "In the game of survival I learned not to think about what was behind me, only what was before me." He explained, "It was the only way I was able to keep myself running."

Sinestra nodded, "Then you were very lucky. In a dangerous situation such thoughts are the reflection of a fool." She admonished, "If you had taken wrong step," She pushed him gently enough to where he wouldn't fall but he'd stumble enough to teeter on the edge of the void he had created, "You would have been in grave trouble."

Harry found swallowing difficult for a few moments as he stood on the edge of his tower clutching his cane nervously. He carefully hobbled away from the edge.

"It is good to know what is in front of you," She smiled darkly, "But you should never forget what is behind you. This is the same as far as memories are concerned but in you're case, you are all too aware of you're memories."

"I thought I was ignoring what was behind me." Harry muttered as he turned his gaze away from the void and back to the image of Hogwarts.

"You are deliberately ignoring it Harry," Sinestra corrected, "There is a difference."

"The difference being?" Harry asked.

"When one is being deliberate then one is aware of the action." Sinestra recited, "In this case you are afraid of what lies behind you. You obsess over this fear by pushing it away."

"That makes no sense." Harry deadpanned.

"By consciously pushing away what you do not like," Sinestra continued, "You are constantly thinking about it."

Harry frowned darkly at his instructor but made no comment otherwise realizing the truth in her words. Harry did constantly find himself trying to repress his memories regarding his summer and the Tri-Wizard tournament. He did try not to think about what could be lurking behind every step he took. It was the way he coped with things. It was how he was able to keep a level head and it was damned hard to keep up. She was right. He was constantly thinking about it which was why he so enjoyed training and pushing himself to his limits. Doing so kept his mind blank.

He used to be able to rely on Hermione and Ron's Presence to keep his mind away from what he'd been through...but lately, without his best friends distracting him...Harry found his thoughts nearly tortured by his memories. They haunted his every action and made focusing on his magic dreadfully difficult.

Harry sat down on the stones heavily. He leaned his cane against his shoulders and clutched the staff of the cane almost protectively to him as he realized what he was avoiding was actually hindering him. Sinestra watched him and smiled. It was a good thing the boy was smart. If he weren't she assumed this training would go on quite a bit slower.

"There is one more flaw I wish you to take a look at before we go back to my reality to start working on you're magic," Sinestra stated, "Look at the scenery for me. In fact, I want you to reach out and try to touch it."

Harry stood leaning heavily on his cane to get up off the ground and hobbled forward toward the crumbling stone railing. When he reached the edge a cool gust of wind flicked through his unruly hair. He reached a hand out and was completely surprised when his fingers brushed what felt like a paint canvas. He pulled the hand back in surprise and looked at Sinestra in shock. What appeared to be a vast expanse of land was merely a canvas backdrop.

"So you see that we have quite a bit of work ahead of us." Sinestra smiled.

Harry nodded, "Yeah."

"Then lets get started with the reason for that void," Sinestra waved her hand and the world around them shifted to a smaller landscape.

Sinestra's glade of trees grew out of the stone floor and she stood gracefully staring at Harry determinedly.

"Until you have perfected you're reality you are not mentally ready to leave the hospital." She stated gravely, "In my reality we will visit you're nightmares and conquer them slowly. We will also be training you're magic and you're physical strength."

"Can't we do that in the normal reality?" Harry asked.

"We could," Sinestra agreed, "But the time I have to get you up to the level needed for you to return to Hogwarts is too short for us to work only in normal reality. Time is slow here, and magic is easier to access. We could not live here, as there is no food that we could safely digest but it is good for meditating and training. Physical activity may be a bit more difficult for you as gravity is slightly skewed...but that will only be beneficial to you."

"If it will be harder for me to do my physical therapy then how would that benefit me?" Harry asked incredulously, "Wouldn't that push my injuries a bit too far?"

"Not necessarily." Sinestra answered, "We will not strain you past your limit. And the strain will help you're muscles grow stronger. It is similar to a martial artist wearing weights. When they are constantly under the strain of the weights while training they will be able to move more easily and freely once the weights are removed."

"I guess that makes sense." Harry stated not quite convinced.

"I am going to make an instant link to this place to anchor it to you're room so you can access it whenever you need to." She waved her hand and her garden slowly began to disappear.

When the two of them were once again standing in Harry's hospital room Sinestra reached into her robes and pulled out a key. It was an odd key, long and without teeth except for the rivets that wrapped around the strait grey shaft. The end was flat and slightly hooked and the top of it was circular with a hole cut through it. Before handing it to Harry Sinestra pulled out what looked like black twine and strung it though the hole in the top of the metal. She pinched both ends of the twine and pulled creating a black metal clasp that would connect at both ends.

"Here," Sinestra handed the key to Harry, "Don't loose this."

Harry nodded and placed the key around his neck clasping the strange twine together with a small click.

"How do I use it?" Harry asked.

"Simply walk outside you're door and place it into the handle." Sinestra explained, "When you walk back into your room it should not be your room any longer. The way back is the same."

Harry nodded as he watched Sinestra replace her outer robe upon her shoulders twirling the mahogany fabric around her head and placing it snugly upon her shoulders.

"Now I won't be back tomorrow," Sinestra stated, "I have a few problems at the school I need to take care of."

"I get a day off?" Harry asked almost hopefully.

Madam Sinestra paused as she regarded her pupil amused, "Hardly." She stated, "I want you to work twice as hard on your exercises tomorrow and to have memorized the Potions book I gave you, particularly the chapter on basic minerals."

Harry groaned, "it was worth a thought I guess," he sighed.

Sinestra smirked at the boy, "I'm sorry to say, Potter that your time for breaks is long since past. We've got a very long way to go and too little time. It'll be a miracle if I can get you ready to return to the living by Christmas."

"Return to the living huh?" Harry asked bemused by his professor's play on words.

"I do expect you to take full advantage of that key I gave you." Sinestra reminded him as she swept out of the room.

Harry winced wondering if she would know if he hadn't indeed used the key. He had a distinct feeling she would not only be aware of it but that she would also be severely disappointed. The scarred boy felt that it was probably best not to test his tutor's ire. So with a dramatic sigh that would make Sirius proud Harry opened his potions text and began reading.

So this chapter is really long. I apologize for the long wait and for any errors that I missed. I must have pre-read, proff-read and edited this thing hundreds of times but I fear that I know that I missed some things. I always do. I do hope you enjoyed this and were not too confused by the "personal space". What I ended up with is as close as I could get to explaining what was in my head. I'm relatively happy with but i am willing to tear the chapter down and continue to try to make it more clear.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

-Red

Blood Price

Hermione Granger was normally a very patient young woman. She was considered one of the cleverest witches of her age and tended to trust authority to a point of near-blind loyalty. Every Professor she'd ever met had been treated with the utmost respect by Hermione. Only once had she ever questioned the merit of a professor, and that one time had been a rather special case. That professor had been a fraud and didn't actually know what he was talking about.

Hermione generally didn't argue with her elders. As was previously stated, she was a very patient girl and tended to give each teacher his or her due allowances for mistakes. Yet this was not currently the case. The bushy haired brunette found herself fuming in her seat as she silently listened to the very first person of authority to ever truly test her patience.

"You've been teaching at Hogwarts for...forty two years?" The high pitched voice laced with fake happiness pulled at Hermione's precarious sanity causing the usually passive young woman to want to stab a knife into her hand and drag it along her fore arm.

"I have." Professor Sinistra nodded calmly her cold eyes regarded the toad before her with an unblinking confidence that was slowly wearing on the small round woman.

The class room was completely silent as every youthful ear was trained to the conversation taking place at the front of the classroom. Heads were bowed carefully staring at their Runes text books though not a single youthful soul was actually reading.

"Why is it you have been periodically leaving school campus Madam Sinistra?" Professor Umbridge asked.

"I was attending to my apprentice," She stated strait faced, "He is too

ill to be taught in the cold dank walls of the school. I am helping him gain the instruction he needs in order to re-join me here."

"If you had an apprentice why haven't you registered him in the ministry files?" Umbridge asked sweetly.

"Because I was not aware the ministry had the authority over who I choose my apprentice to be." Sinistra stated icily, "I believe that authority can only fall to me."

"You have never taken an apprentice before so why would you choose to do so now?" Umbridge challenged.

"Obviously my time on this earth is running short madam, and I thank you for reminding me of this fact." Sinistra stated calmly.

Her students winced. Sinistra's icy calm was a warning. It warned her students that her patience was beginning to run thin. Many of the students in the first row of seat scooted back as far as they could go in their seats raising their books up to protect they're faces instinctually. Hermione dared a careful glance at the two women as they danced their verbal battle.

"Is it true you lived outside of Ministry jurisdiction for twenty years of you're life?" Umbridge asked digging for a weakness in what was becoming a battle of will.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees and all of the children in the classroom no longer pretended they were not watching. There was a unanimous sound of desks scraping against the cold stone of the floor as each student pushed themselves further away from the front of the classroom.

"I do not believe that you're question holds any relevancy to what I am doing in my classroom." Sinistra stated quietly her face was serene and even kindly but her eyes were hard and unforgiving as

she stared at the amphibian in front of her.

Her patience had snapped.

"As High Inquisitor it is my duty to check upon all of the professors of this institution." Professor Umbridge squeaked, "This includes background resources. I need to make sure you're background will not hinder you're mental capability for the job."

"Professor Dippet knew all about my background and...'mental' capabilities when he hired me." Madam Sinistra intoned, "And Professor Dumbledore is more then aware of my background in Runes study and Astrology. I spent more then half my life studying ancient runes and am a master of the highest Wizarding level in practical use and knowledge of the subject. This mastery in Runes pales in comparison only to my mastery of the subject of Astrology! If you found a more qualified professor to replace me I would leave this castle without complaint. But seeing as how I am this county's foremost expert in the subject I do believe that, mentally, I am more then able to teach a couple of school children."

Madam Sinistra stood up gracefully and made her way to the door, "I do believe that those twenty years I lived outside of Ministry jurisdiction is a piece of my personal past that is not at all relevant to my job and therefore does not need to be addressed." She opened the door graciously for Professor Umbridge as the toad automatically stood to leave, "Thank you for coming to my classroom Madam but I fear I must get back to giving my full attention to my students."

Professor Umbridge waddled out of the classroom with a frown on her face. She had been kicked out of the classroom in a rather elegant manner. It galled her to realize that the Mysterious Madam Sinistra was correct on every point she'd made. Deloris Umbridge had never felt so powerless in her life and she did not like the feeling at all. She knew; however, that Madam Sinistra was not a woman she could cross. The French born witch was incredibly influential in

many circles, foreign or otherwise...and she was right. There was not another witch as skilled and knowledgeable in runes as she. This was not a battle Deloris could ever hope to win so she gathered her notebook and swallowed her pride to march on to the next unsuspecting victim of her eradication of the professors of Hogwarts.

Sinistra closed the door quietly and turned to her frightened students. She raised a single eyebrow causing each pupil to turn back to their reading in sudden guilt at being caught eavesdropping. Only one student remained staring silently at her professor. She was the only student in the classroom that truly understood the art that required manipulating runes and she was Madam Sinistra's favorite student of the year.

"Did you have a question Miss. Granger?" She asked the intuitive girl, "If it concerns anything other than the lesson then I would ask that you please keep it to yourself until the end of class."

Hermione nodded to her professor and went back to her work while inside questions and fears whirled within her active mind. She was furious about the self proclaimed "High Inquisitor" of Hogwarts and sick from missing the third member of her little trio of friends. It had been nearly two months since she and Ron had seen Harry and lately his letters were becoming less and less. The days at Hogwarts were becoming stifling and confining. Professor Umbridge's hold over the castle was tightening further every day and more than one student suffered under her punishing torments. It was all Hermione could do not to run to the increasingly busy Dumbledore and demand some action be made against the toadish tyrant.

When Runes class ended Hermione waited at the door for Ron to enter the classroom before closing the door. The two young Griffandors walked swiftly to Professor Sinistra's desk with barely contained hope.

"Professor Sinistra," Hermione began.

"He's fine Miss Granger," Madam Sinistra stated all ready predicting what her question was going to be, "It is not wise to come to me asking about my apprentice while in the school. You should know this."

"I do professor," Hermione quickly amended, "it's just..."

"We miss him." Ron supplied for his friend, "And he hasn't written in a while so we thought that something may have happened."

Madam Sinistra regarded the two children before her carefully, "If he has not written then I apologize as I have kept him to busy to do so." She stated seriously, "Much has happened to the boy since the three of you were last together. Be patient, I believe he is working as hard as he is so that you three will be together again soon."

Ron and Hermione nodded only a little satisfied by her explanation. They left the classroom in contemplation.

"He's been gone longer then I thought he'd be." Ron pouted, "I suppose it's because he can't use magic correctly right?"

"Perhaps," Hermione sighed, "But the extent of his injuries were severe Ron..." She stopped in the middle of the corridor her eyes downcast as she thought over how stressful this year had truly turned out to be.

What with the Prophet's slander of Dumbledore's name defiling his credibility at the ministry and the High Inquisitor's rule affecting everything that was happening in the castle. Then there were the defense classes themselves. Hermione despaired at ever being able to pass her OWLs with no way to practice the content that would be tested. She looked up as Ron stopped and turned his questioning gaze upon her and she sighed resolving to write another letter to Harry to express her emotions better. Perhaps writing it down would

help clear her head even if the first draft of the letter never actually reached her best friend.

Harry sat silently in his made up reality. The scenery of this exercise had changed drastically since the first time he had tried creating it. He sat upon cool dew-kissed grass beneath one of the large oaks that sat beside the Hogwarts Lake. The Whomping Willow swayed serenely to his left at the entrance to the Forbidden forest and a rough cabin sat proudly several feet behind Harry. The Castle towered in the distance to Harry's right back and the Owlry rose up behind that.

The castle was still just a backdrop but he could walk around in Hagrid's cabin even going so far as to pick up random artifacts scattered across the one room dwelling. The grass beneath him was as real as it could have been. The wet stalks even dampened his bum long after he'd left his thinking place. Harry had come a long way within the past two months.

He still could only walk with his cane but the training he'd been through had enabled him to run by forcing fire into the very bones of his legs. His control and knowledge over his magic had jumped drastically since the summer. Harry breathed in the subtle scent of autumn as he meditated. His ability to change his area's seasons was a gift Sinistra had said came from his second element, air. Sinistra had given him loads of books on the development of weather and he had studied them so that he could mimic weather patterns almost perfectly with this born gift. This ability over the weather only extended to his place of meditation. He would not be able to create a storm or even a small gust of wind outside this personal place. Weather mages were extinct and Harry's gift for fire was far stronger than his gift for air.

Voldemort had almost completely undone the knot that Professor Sinistra has tied in their link and Harry could feel that it was only a matter of time before the tyrant re-established his link with the young

Mr. Potter. Harry both dreaded the inevitable fact and accepted it. He felt he was as prepared for the mental encounter as he would ever be and he was desperately restless. He felt that he had a good enough grasp on his magic and enough confidence to return to Hogwarts. Sinistra did not agree with him on that fact and even Dumbledore's frequent visits and praise did not hinder her judgment. She felt he was too arrogant to return.

Harry frowned and his concentration slipped. The magic in the air swirled creating storm cells above his head as his frustration made itself known in his physical space. He stood gracefully and held his cane as he walked. The limp in his step was obvious and he did not walk quite as fast as he'd like but Harry knew now that this gait would be with him forever until the day he died. The bones had become too brittle after so many severe breaks. His muscles were strengthening nicely but the bones in his legs simply could not hold his weight properly.

He'd been saddened and angry at the fact that his legs could not progress any further without magical help but he'd accepted the deformity after realizing he'd receive no mercy for having it. It was either live with the fact comfortably or give up. Harry had never been one to give up. So he learned how to strengthen his bones with the molten fire that lived within him. It was tiring, and magically draining so it was not a technique he could always use...but in a tight spot he'd at least be able to flee for a short time. Hopefully it would give him the edge and the time he would need.

He hadn't lost everything after all. He still had people who loved him and more then one secret weapon that made up for his legs.

Harry stood and tilted his head back allowing a calming breeze to brush across his skin. He'd gotten to the point where he loved meditation. It calmed his mind and chased away the nightmares that were commonplace with Harry. The control it gave him over his body and mind was a definite plus and Harry was growing in his grasp of

Occlumency. Harry walked serenely across the wet grass feeling lighter than he had when he'd entered his sanctuary earlier that morning.

He walked toward the Whomping Willow watching the swaying branches wave threateningly just as the real Willow did on the true Hogwarts grounds. Harry smiled thinly at the memories this tree held for him, both good and bad. He eyed the distinct door that sat at the base of the tree, a difference that Harry had created as a physical exit and entrance to his realm. Sinistra had frowned when he placed the door within the trunk of such a violent tree. Harry thought she didn't like it because it tried to whip her every time she walked in to his place. Harry simply liked the illusion of security placing the door brought to him and the challenge it gave him every time he wanted to leave.

Harry grinned pulling out a key from the loose jeans that he wore; he'd abandoned hospital gowns a month ago. The key he held was an old fashioned looking key with a thin round shaft and three different teeth located around the shaft in a triangle. The head of the key was a three sided pyramid with intricate runes carved into the metal. Harry flicked the key into the air as his eyes locked onto the key hole in the door. The key hovered beside Harry as the branches thrashed toward the young boy. Harry waited watching the pattern of the branches and deciding how best to get his key into the keyhole without one of the branches hitting his key and sending it flying off course.

The pattern began to reveal itself and Harry slowly grinned. He'd made this game for himself when he first decided to place his door in the tree. Sinistra had laughed when she'd witnessed it stating that he was technically fighting his own mind by fighting the branches. Harry had taken those words to heart using the tree to hone his mind for Occlumency. The tree's patterns got increasingly difficult every time Harry encountered it. He had a suspicion that Sinistra might have placed a bit of herself into its leaves to continually challenge Harry.

There, an opening. Harry grinned as he pushed the key into a dart forcing the small object forward and guiding it with a finger as he would have guided it with his old wand. The Key dodged the quickly moving branches weaving in and out of the pattern Harry had recognized easily with Harry's eyes and magic to guide it. The small piece of metal jammed itself into the keyhole in the small door and turned to the right after a push from Harry. The tree stilled and seemed to sag as though realizing it lost this small battle. Harry grinned brilliantly stepping through the now serene branches and turning the small metal knob opening the door and stepping out into the busy hall way of the hospital. A few nurses looked up, saw it was Harry and looked back to whatever they were doing. Harry waved to a few of them as he pulled the key out of the gnarled wood of his sanctuary door closing the hospital door with a soft click.

Harry waited counting to ten before inserting the key again turning it back to the left. The sound of something mechanical moving inside the door clicked and snapped then grew silent. Harry smiled nodding to a Wizard healer as he passed discussing something with a Muggle nurse.

The boy winked at his neighbor, an old woman who sat scowling at Harry every day he left his room to enter his or Sinistra's sanctuaries. He was sure the old woman found him to be odd as he would walk out of his room several times a day only to seemingly re-enter it. She couldn't see what he was doing so he doubted she thought anything of him other than that he might be a bit daft. At his wink the old woman pursed her lips and frowned more deeply looking away from Harry in a huff.

The-boy-who-lived smiled amused and opened his door again to enter his hospital room. He wasn't surprised to find Remus Lupin and the young Nymphadora Tonks sitting at his bedside playing a game of Muggle chess.

"Wotcher Harry," Tonks greeted looking up from her game, "Hope you don't mind the intrusion. I brought food." The young auror looked up grinning at Harry as she held up a white paper bag with a restaurant logo stamped across the front.

"You brought food," Harry stated grinning, "You aren't intruding at all."

Tonks smirked at him knowingly holding up the bag in offering.

He walked across the room grasping the bag she offered him and sat down slowly next to her. He grinned at Tonks in thanks when he found some Indian take out and picked up the plastic fork that had been left for him in the bag digging into the food happily.

Tonks and a few other Orders members had begun appearing in Harry's room as rumors of him being alive escalated and mutterings of where he was became increasingly accurate. Dumbledore had felt a bit of extra protection wouldn't hurt Harry though Sinistra disagreed. The old Runes Master was severely unhappy to have strangers in his room while they trained. Secretly Harry agreed with the sorceress. He didn't like having to scan each individual's magic for a taint of dark. He also felt that so many witches and Wizards going to and from a well known Muggle hospital would be like painting a sign for the death eaters proclaiming "Here be Potter"!

He smiled at the young metamorphosist taking the bag of sandwiches from her eagerly. He did have to admit that Tonks was by far his favorite guard as she always brought something from the outside world for him to eat. He also liked the fact that she kept Remus in high spirits as he had been down a lot as late.

"So how is your projection project going?" Remus asked taking Tonk's last knight.

"Terribly." Harry sighed miserably, "I just don't have the mind power that Dumbledore expects of me. At this rate I'm not sure I'll be able to

repel any of Timmy's mind tricks with any of my own. The wall I get, but this projection of memories for confusing an attacker...I just don't think I'll be able to get it anytime soon."

"You'll get it," Tonks grinned, "I don't get any of it, but I'm sure you'll be able to figure it out."

Harry grinned, "Yeah like you got Lupin's furry little problem? It took you ages to realize that he wasn't talking about animagi training."

Lupin grinned, "Or that time Sirius pranked you're hair to always change the opposite color you envisioned."

"Yeah, yeah." Tonks rolled her eyes at the two men and quickly moved her king across her board tagging Lupin's king and proclaiming "Checkmate" with a huge grin plastered across her lips, "But I can still beat both of you're arses at chess, Wizard or otherwise."

Lupin chuckled and Harry pulled out the text he'd been studying for Sinistra. For a while all was silent in the room except for various exclamations of triumph from Tonks and a few crunching noises from Harry as he ate and studied. A Nurse walked in and quizzed Harry about his health before leaving and Harry started on his theory essay for his Potions study.

Finally as the sun began to set Harry set his work down and rubbed his temples trying to ease away the cobwebs that had overtaken his mind. He looked up at Tonks and Lupin. Tonks was now going through some sort of Wizard kata and Lupin was pretending to read while watching the female dark-wizard catcher. Harry sighed rubbing his arms which had become lean with thin muscle over the past two months. He didn't appear buff at all. His arms still held their scrawny shape to them but Harry was happy to point out that there was a little bit of shape to them now. The muscle training Sinistra put him on was paying off.

"Lupin?" Harry asked casually, "Do you think I'm ready? To go back to Hogwarts I mean." He winced realizing he wasn't at all subtle in his question.

Lupin set his book down and looked at Harry carefully, "Do you believe you're ready Harry? Can you face what will happen when you re-enter the Wizarding world? Can you face the children of death eaters in you're on school?"

Harry looked at the scared hands in his lap. Callused and strong Harry barely recognized them from the deformed hands he'd had to bare when he'd come to the hospital. Spending the equivalent of days inside Sinistra's reality and then every waking hour in the true reality training had made him strong. Not simply physically but mentally and magically as well. What was really only two months in this world had become four when combined with all of his training in Sinistra's garden. Hours spent there were minutes spent in his hospital room. He felt older then just two months passage of time and he felt ready for whatever the Wizarding world was ready to throw at him...

Yet, he still feared that day at the Tri-wizard tournament. All of those months running for his life, surviving had taken their toll on his mental state. He knew he could handle allot more then he could during those hellish times but Harry also did not know how he would react if any threat were sent his way this time. The fear was still there, and it caused his power to lash out at who ever or whatever was around him. What if Harry mistook a simple prank as a threat? He shivered think about how he might act.

Harry had also become claustrophobic after being forced into small spaces by his captors. Harry couldn't be in a place without knowing he had direct access to a door or window for escape even if he didn't need it. The thought of being crammed inside the corridors with all of those students without any way to move around them quickly terrified

him.

"I think I am..." Harry muttered thoughtfully, "But I'm not sure. There's still a lot that intimidates me when I think about going back to Hogwarts."

Lupin nodded, "But you know the teachers and Dumbledore will help you out if you need it."

"I know that." Harry stated, "But I feel like...like if I asked them to baby me I'll never get over my fears."

Lupin frowned, "They wouldn't baby you Harry." He said, "I don't want you being afraid of asking for help if you really need it." He closed his book to look at Harry more fully, "Just because you ask for help doesn't mean you're weak. Sometimes it takes more strength to ask for help then it does to avoid it."

Harry nodded, "I know that." He rolled his eyes, "Merlin do I know that."

Lupin leaned back nodding his head, "Then maybe you are ready." He stated, "Talk to Madam Sinistra. She doesn't teach astrology tonight so she'll be here soon right?"

The door to the room clicked for a moment as though someone were locking Harry, Tonks and Lupin inside.

"Speak of the devil." Lupin grinned.

"That's my que." Harry smirked, "I'd better get in there. The last time I was late she had me copying runes again." He grimaced as he stood remembering the hours he spent copying and re-writing each rune thirty times.

Tonks chuckled and Remus smirked ruthlessly at Harry as the boy

pouted and walked toward the door.

Harry inserted the unusual triple key Sinistra had given him a month ago and the same one he had used earlier to leave his sanctuary into the door handle. He turned the key to the right twice this time listening to the mechanical clicks and then the silence. Harry turned the handle and opened the door. On the other side of the door a serene bamboo garden enveloped the young man as he stepped through the frame walking with his cane confidently into the warm sunlight Sinistra liked to bathe her garden in. In the middle of the garden by the stream Harry watched his professor seemingly dance with a strict grace and precision Harry envied as she ran through tai-chi exercises.

"You're late." Sinistra stated without pausing in her slow graceful movements.

"I could say the same to you," Harry smirked, "I'm not the one showing up after dinner time."

Sinistra ignored the boy as she finished up her kata bowing to the garden around her before regarding her pupil. He was grinning at her cheekily and his eyes were completely trusting though still a little defiant. His aura was strong and balanced. The fire and air elements wrapped themselves around and within Harry fluctuating in a pattern that Harry had constructed after a great deal of meditation. Her experienced recognized his scarred aura flicker against his skin showing his irritation and restlessness. After so much work one would think the boy would obtain some control over his emotions.

"I take it you still can not project consciously." Sinistra stated disappointed in her pupil.

"I can't," Harry grinned easily back at his professor, "I guess I'm just too thick-headed to figure it out."

Sinistra's expression darkened at her pupils mock joy, "Too stubborn is more like it," She frowned, "You're slacking and giving up too quickly."

"Yep," Harry admitted, "But my stores are building just like you taught me and I can execute those katas you taught to me almost perfectly."

Sinistra frowned darkly at her pupils attempt at humor. He was trying to distract her from his failure and it wasn't working. The boy had learned to make light of what he couldn't get to work so that he didn't despair over it. He'd done so with his poor ability at walking.

She felt that the main reason he would never be able to walk properly wasn't just because he'd damaged the bones in his legs too severely. It was also because of how she taught him to channel his energy constantly through his body without thought. Doing this built up the boy's magical and even physical reserves so that when he needed to move efficiently he'd be able to do so within a second by pushing that built up energy into his muscles. No amount of tissue or bone damage would be able to slow the boy down once he tapped into that reserve, but the minute the reserve was used up he wouldn't be able to move for days.

Sinistra hoped to avoid a burn out like that by making him build up the technique by constantly using and expanding the reserves she had him create. So far it was a huge success as Harry's body had a full range of motion when he practiced with it. It was a risky technique, but it was necessary.

"None of that will matter if you can't control your emotions or memories." Sinistra scolded, "Voldemort will not be attacking you face to face any time soon. When he does attack you it will be a battle inside your mind. No kata or weapon can help you in there."

"I know," Harry sighed, "But I'm tired of this hospital...I'm even tired of this reality. I miss my friends and the stone walls of Hogwarts. I'm

sick of not knowing what's going on in the world! What's Voldemort up to? The ministry? I hate this feeling! It's like I can't do anything! I feel trapped! I can't help that I'm restless!"

Sinistra smiled slightly to herself, "Patience," She commanded, "I'll talk to Dumbledore and see what he thinks about the matter. In the mean time tap into you're reserves and sink into that cane of yours. I have a feeling that we may get a reaction this time."

The two of them had been using every means they thought possible to try to understand the mysterious cane that had been given to Harry by his god-father. Sinistra used it to try to help Harry understand and learn the importance of Runes. She made Harry feel the magic of the cane with his aura caressing the canes aura and sinking his own aura into it every day in order to try to recognize its peculiar magical signature. Harry had become rather attached to the cane but hadn't yet used it other then for walking.

Harry nodded and sat down on the dirt pulling his knees with his hands into a cross legged position. He placed his cane on his lap laterally and wrapped his fingers around the top and bottom of the cane. His back straitened and his eyes stared unblinkingly down at the cane in his lap with his head erect. If anyone were to look at him in passing they'd think his eyes were closed.

Harry looked closely at the length of ivory and obsidian. His golden eye traced the runes that flowed inside and out of the object making up its aura. Harry allowed his magic o flow into the runes closing up the gaps in the patterns. His eyes rolled to the back of his eyelids as only the image of the magic surrounding the cane filled his minds eye. He felt and watched as the magic of the cane welcomed and even embraced his magic. It felt as though gentle arms encircled Harry's magical core. The runes whispered of secrets that Harry understood but couldn't reach like a thought forgotten at the edge of his mind. He strained to reach the gentle ruby glow that danced in and out of his subconscious. His fingers tightened around the handle and the

bottom of the cane restlessly.

Sinistra watched her pupil's aura tango with the cane with a careful eye. The Cane's ruby aura lifted a thin thread of power away from the cane that traveled tentatively up Harry's arms, down his shoulder, through his chest and into his stomach where it attached itself to the blazing center that was his magical and spiritual core.

Harry's brows furrowed, "Sensei?" He asked quietly, "There's something...I think the cane is sending me images of something...or saying something. I can't make it out."

"Open your mind to it." Sinistra instructed her heart racing, "You can trust it Harry. The cane does not have a sentient mind and you know it well enough by now."

Harry nodded pushing more of his magic into the cane and opening himself up more fully to the magic of the cane. He could feel it as it attached himself to his magic but still staying a separate entity from his own magic for which Harry was grateful. The last time his magic merged with a foreign magic he'd blown up several acres of land without thought.

An instruction. That's what the image/message was. The cane was instructing Harry to--.

"Professor," Harry stated, "I'm going to do something...I can't explain it but I think I know what the cane is sending to me."

Sinistra nodded, "Then do it." She stated eager to see what it was the Cane was gifting her pupil.

Harry fidgeted shifting his weight several times as his face was wrought in concentration. His hands rubbed the cane in his lap feeling the length of the ivory and pausing as he touched each point of ruby that was imbedded in it. He pushed fire into his magic allowing

the flame to run down his fingers towards the ruby.

One index finger each rested on the two middle rings of thin ruby pushing his fire into the stone. Sinistra watched interested as the fire sunk into the stones causing the stones to glow brilliantly. The fire ran into the rest of the cane jumping from one obsidian checker to the next causing the obsidian to glow for a scant second and cool. When the fire reached both tips of the cane the Ruby handle and foot shined like miniature red suns.

Harry moved his hands to grasp both ends of the cane. He twisted his right hand forward and his left back the Ruby turning in his fingers with a small click. Harry's brows furrowed more deeply and he slowly pulled both ends away from the cane. Fire erupted from the spot where the ruby met the ivory and obsidian and a red-hot glow grew away from the cane.

Sinistra watched fascinated as the obvious forms of hot metal grew longer and longer. Harry pulled to his entire arm length when the shaft of the cane fell and steam rose from the two newly forged thin blades that extended from the ruby in Harry's fingers. Harry sat posed with the blades held in front of him. His face was blank as he raised his arms higher turning the blades to rest the points upon his stomach just below his ribs.

Sinistra's eyes widened and she reached out with her hand and her magic as she uttered, "Harry!" In alarm even as Harry plunged the blades into and through his abdomen.

Sinistra lunged at Harry as a gale of heat and fire whipped around him lifting his limp form off the ground. His head fell backwards and his black hair danced around his skull like feathers made of flame. Harry's face showed no pain or even awareness as his fire danced along his body burning away his clothes as his hands continued to clutch the blades. His blood flowed down the blades soaking into the metal.

Sinistra couldn't reach past the gale of fire even as she threw her magic at it in desperation. She had told Harry to trust the damned object! What a fool she had been to allow him to enter into the magic without preparing his mind first!

The Gale began to slow down and cool. Harry still floated there his toes limply brushing the top of the grass. He seemed suspended in time for a moment as his arms slowly pulled out the swords that impaled him. Sinistra was shocked to notice that the metal came out clean without any blood dripping from the sharp edges. When they came out of him more fully Sinistra was also surprised to see only thin red scars that glowed quietly and then faded from his stomach.

A dark red rune sat where the short swords had entered. The Rune was not one easily recognized and held element of the runes for fire and wind combined with a third rune she definitely couldn't recognize though she felt she ought to. The rune too faded until it was just barely darker than Harry's pale skin. She had a suspicion the rune would be mirrored on Harry's back as well.

Sinistra ran toward Harry as the blades dropped from his fingers and his body dropped from the air. She fell to her knees as she just barely caught him.

"Of all the foolish--!" She growled shaking the unconscious boy in her arms, "Harry! Wake up!" She was beginning to shake fear consuming her thoughts.

Lupin and Tonks jumped up when Madam Sinistra holding an unconscious Harry Potter appeared like smoke in the middle of the room. His cane and two blood-colored blades lay on the floor beneath him and Sinistra looked up at the two with a panic-stricken face. Remus immediately ran over to help Madam Sinistra lift the unconscious and unclothed boy while Tonks turned on the spot apparating to a place she could safely contact Dumbledore.

Sinistra frantically slammed her palm upon the call button yelling angrily into the receiver and Medi-witches and Muggle nurses streamed into the room within minutes. Dumbledore was in the room with Tonks three minutes later and the hospital room was filled with a chaotic sort of order. Vitals were checked as tests were being taken and medical spells flew through the room as frantic Healers and doctors tried to understand what had happened. Madam Sinistra talked quickly to explain what had happened to Dumbledore. Remus sat holding the Harry's abnormally warm hand watching Harry with unblinking fear and concern.

I will be honest, this chapter did not turn out as I originally intended but it fit into the plot so well i decided to go with it. as to reviewers who called Sinistra a "MarrySue" character I must confess I have never heard the phrase. Sinistra is not all powerful. She is going to make alot of mistakes, nor will Harry be all powerful. he has his limits. Don't worry, there will be plenty of wizards and witches who can use most of the magics Harry is continuously displaying and more. Magics will be explained as time goes on. I have many plans to twist and play with the magics and the plot. It is getting harder to write as I near the parts of the story I am most excited about so I apologize for the delays. They are due to a need to make the chapters less...rushed. And thank every one who reviewed with constructive criticism for me. You're words are helping a great deal. I really appreciate it. Keep them coming please! still working on a finding a Beta I trust though. I'm working on it, I swear.

Ja for now!

-Red

Consequence

Hours later Harry slept peacefully. His shirt was off for all to see the small rune that adorned his abdomen where the blades had plunged through his magical core just below his ribs.

"What happened?" Remus growled to Madam Sinistra pulling her away from the bed Harry slept on.

"A mistake!" Sinistra growled back angrier at herself then at anything else in the room, "A ridiculous mistake! I should have realized, should have known the cane was based on blood magic. I should have noticed it's magic take a greater hold of his spirit when I was watching him make the blasted blades!!" She began to pace agitatedly in front of Remus, "He wasn't ready for something like this!" She turned to face the silent Dumbledore, "His magical core! What will happen to his magical core?"

"Nothing apparently," Dumbledore stated quietly.

He sat beside Harry's bed holding the two thin crimson blades and staring at Harry through his spectacles, "His magical core is fine. It hasn't changed; rather, he seems to have created a magical contract with these remarkable blades." He looked up at Sinistra and Remus, "You said these came out of the cane Mr. Black gave him for his birth day?"

"Not came," Sinistra insisted, "They were forged."

Remus growled, "I told Sirius not to give it to him," He stated angrily, "he thought no harm would come of it but I swore that cane smelled bad."

"And what do these blades smell like to you now?" Dumbledore asked Remus serenely.

"I don't know," Remus growled, "Like blood perhaps?" He glared at Sinistra, "Like Harry's blood?"

"No one is more angry than me at the moment Mr. Lupin so stop insinuating you're the only one with feelings for the boy." Sinistra retaliated icily back her arms crossed in front of her chest.

Dumbledore sighed and held up the two blades toward Remus, "What do they smell like Remus? Really," Dumbledore asked seriously.

Remus frowned at the headmaster and stepped toward him leaning his head down to sniff the scent of the blood-stained metal. He paused in surprise his eyes opening in shock as he quickly moved toward Harry and gently sniffed him.

"They smell like him," Remus said quietly.

"Well of course they do," Sinistra stated impatiently, "They are covered in Harry's blood."

"No!" Remus stated, "That's not what I--. I mean to say--." He shook his head incredulous, "They don't smell like blood or even metal...They have Harry's scent; his exact scent!"

Sinistra's mouth dropped open before closing thoughtfully, "I see." She stated walking over to Harry's bedside to stand next to the two men, "A binding contract." She nodded toward Dumbledore, "But it's more than that isn't it?"

"I believe so," Dumbledore agreed, "It's only speculation mind you, but I do believe the old saying that a sword is an extension of one's self comes into play here."

"This is really old magic if that is the case," Sinistra frowned looking at Remus, "You said Sirius gave it to Harry?"

"Yes," Remus frowned noticing a change in Sinistra's demeanor, "It was one of the old family heirlooms."

"Interesting," Sinistra stated gently picking up one of the blades by its ruby hilt, "I need to look into this," She looked sharply at Dumbledore, "Do you mind?" She asked handing him the sword back.

"Not at all," Dumbledore smiled.

"If my hunch is correct he will be waking up shortly," She stated as she walked quickly out of the room, "When he does floo me. You'll know where I'll be."

"Of course," Dumbledore nodded.

"Wait," Remus stated incredulously, "You're leaving? You can't leave!"

"I need to find out what this might have done to him Mr. Lupin," Sinistra growled, "I need to find out what the long lasting effects will be to better help my pupil!"

Madam Sinistra stormed out of the room her robes flapping behind her as she exited. The door opened without her touching it and closed loudly as she left it.

Remus clenched his fists and Dumbledore chided him gently, "Calm down Remus." He stated, "She's scared and feeling guilty. Emily has never been one to handle strong emotion well." Dumbledore set the twin swords against the wall next to their ivory sire and looked at Remus over the rim of his spectacles, "Shouldn't we begin to inform the rest of the family what has happened?"

Remus nodded suddenly shame faced having forgotten of all but his own worry and anger towards Madam Sinistra, "I'll go call the

Grangers." he stated standing and walking toward the door.

"Shouldn't you inform Sirius first?" Dumbledore asked innocently.

Remus grimaced, "I think I'll inform him after I've called the grangers and have the ability to tell him in person. He's not going to take this well. I'll need to calm him down before he storms into the hospital." The werewolf explained.

Dumbledore nodded drawing his wand and producing a patronus phoenix wordlessly to send the message to the Weasleys. Within minutes the door opened to reveal a distraught Molly Weasley and her gangly husband appearing through the door frame.

"What's happened Albus?" Molly asked scurrying across the room to clutch Harry's hand anxiously, "You said there was an accident?"

Arthur Weasley placed his hand on his wife's shoulder equally as anxious watching Albus Dumbledore for answers.

"No need to over worry yourselves." Dumbledore stated calmly, "Let us wait for the Grangers, Sirius, and Remus to arrive."

As they waited Dumbledore smiled kindly to Arthur Weasley, "How is the watch going Arthur?" He asked casually.

"It's been uneventful Albus," Arthur stated gravely, "I'm lucky Sturgis is on watch tonight and not me, though we're worried at the lack of movement from You-Know-Who's end."

Albus nodded patiently, "I wouldn't worry about that yet Arthur," He stated, "He is moving in other ways, building his strength. When the time comes we'll be ready."

"I hope so Albus." Molly stated placing her hand over Arthur's even as she clutched Harry's hand.

The door burst open and a harried Jane Granger with her Husband rushed to the adults around Harry looking over the boy worriedly, "What's happened?" Ed asked, "We got Remus's call and drove over as quickly as the traffic would allow. Is Harry all right?"

His eyes roamed over the sleeping boy frantically.

"He's fine," Dumbledore smiled softly, "We are waiting for Sirius and Remus to arrive."

"Where is she?" A voice growled as the door slammed open, "I'll kill her, great Sorceress or no," The voice was revealed to belong to a very distraught Sirius Black, "She has a lot to answer for Albus, now where is she?"

"Who?" Ed asked.

"What is he talking about Albus?" Jane asked suspiciously.

"Calm down Sirius," Albus Dumbledore stated conjuring chairs, "It sounds as if you've all ready heard Remus's side of the story. If you'd like to hear the rest then I advise that you sit down."

Remus burst into the room seconds later, "I tried to calm him down before he ran off on his self-righteous crusade!" Remus stated breathlessly, "I'm sorry but I couldn't hold him."

"We've noticed," Dumbledore smiled, "Please have a seat Remus."

Remus sat down and the other adults save Sirius followed suit. Sirius was staring white-faced at the swords leaning against the walls. The other adults turned their gaze to the eerily colored blades uncomprehending.

"Sit down Sirius," Albus commanded, "All will be explained."

Sirius sat into his chair slowly. His knuckles were white as they clutched the arms shakily.

"This isn't your fault Sirius," Remus soothed.

"I gave it to him," Sirius's voice shook, "I didn't know it would...I gave it to him!"

"No one saw this coming Sirius," Dumbledore was shaking his head at the fearful man before him, "Neither myself or Madam Sinistra foresaw such an outcome. She and I know more about magical objects than you. If anyone were to blame it would be the two of us for not realizing the price such objects ask of their users."

"I'm sorry," Jane Granger interjected, "But what are you two talking about? Those swords?"

"Partially Mrs. Granger," Dumbledore nodded shooting Sirius a placating look, "Sirius would you please calm down?" he asked, "Worrying about what you should or should not have done will not help Harry."

Sirius clenched his fists and jaw in answer as he stared unblinkingly at the swords that leaned innocently against the wall.

"Are we ready then?" Albus asked.

Multiple nods around the room answered him so Albus continued, "Those swords are the product of a binding contract. The cane Sirius gifted Harry seems to have chosen Harry as its new guardian."

"What do you mean 'chosen'?" Jane asked.

"Magical artifacts that are old enough will sometimes develop a personality of their own. They do not become exactly sentient, but

they will develop a taste for specific magics. Harry seems to have the specific magic that the cane has been waiting for." Dumbledore explained, "A binding contract is when a person gives a part of his or her magic and combines it to the magic of the object. The object becomes personally bound to the person with whom it holds contract. This means no one except that person can use the object."

"Oh," Jane Granger frowned, "Then why is Harry unconscious?"

"Well a normal contract only requires the magic to be given. Which can be a draining experience on it's own..." Dumbledore stated stroking his beard, thoughtfully, "The way the cane finalized the contract was by dipping itself directly into Harry's magical core collecting both magic and blood, which is unusual."

The faces of the four wizards in the room listening to Albus had turned white. All four sets of eyes were on the blood-colored blades leaning innocently against the wall while Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked confused.

"They collected...?" Jane began.

Molly stood interrupting Mrs. Granger as she hurried around to Harry lifting his covers and inspecting his stomach. Jane and Ed watched as Molly placed her hands on Harry's stomach as though searching for something that wasn't there.

"Where are the stab wounds?" Molly asked quietly.

Jane and Ed stiffened at hearing Molly's question.

"There are none." Dumbledore stated calmly, "The blades went clean in and left the same way without damaging anything within or outside of Harry."

"What?" Jane asked worry and anger battled for control of the

Muggle woman's emotions as she glared at Dumbledore, "Clean in and out?"

"Do you mean to say that Madam Sinistra stabbed Harry with those swords?" Ed asked as he carefully placed a gentle hand on his wife's shoulder to calm her down.

Dumbledore shook his head, "No," He stated gravely, "It was Harry himself I'm afraid. Though Harry was under a trance and I scarcely believe he was aware of his actions, or so observed Madam Sinistra."

"Madam Sinistra was there and she didn't do anything to stop him?" Jane asked furious.

"I assume she was helpless to do so according to her reaction to the event. She mentioned that she couldn't 'reach him'," Dumbledore stated, "I'm not entirely sure what she meant by that myself but I believe she really couldn't do anything to stop it once the process of the bind began."

When Jane and Ed grew silent Dumbledore knew they were listening to him intently. Both Adults watched him unblinkingly while Molly and Arthur glanced nervously at each other and Sirius continued to silently stare at the twin crimson swords.

"Magic," Remus stated quietly, "is normally a difficult thing to control...Try to imagine ancient magic trapped within a small object for centuries with no way to get out and programmed to find a specific master." The werewolf shifted in his seat uncomfortably under the double Granger stare, "Magic, like humans, evolves over time. When it is used it will change based on how the user wields it. This is how Wizards become particularly good at specific spells or elements. Their magic evolves through how best to serve its user. When magic is not used over a great amount of time it will take hold of the basic rules that first bound it and evolve on it's own becoming

wild and difficult to control. Sometimes it becomes fixed upon a specific being or object while it is trapped and once it is released there is little anyone can do to stop it."

"When old wands choose a new Wizard or Witch it will often force too much power into the bind of the new witch or Wizard rendering them magically drained for days," Arthur explained to the Grangers, "I work for the Ministry of Magic under the department for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. You'd be surprised how many old teapots will try to kill Muggles because the magic that has been placed in them was left alone for too long." He smiled shakily, "We have to be careful not to trigger the objects' magic because if the magic is freed from confinement it will wheel out of control quickly. A lot of Witches and Wizards don't realize how potentially dangerous it can be to place magic into an un-changing artifact."

"If it's so dangerous why use it at all?" Jane asked angrily.

"Because if we don't use it and control it," Molly began seriously, "We'll die." She sighed brushing back a few of Harry's stray hairs off his face, "Magic is a part of us. It is as important to us as breathing. If it isn't used it will find a way to manifest itself. Sometimes it will manifest itself in dangerous ways that could be potentially harmful. The more you oppress it the more it will break out. The more it breaks out the stronger it grows until it overwhelms the Witch or Wizard who is a part of it." Her hand stilled as she watched Harry sleep, "Many Witches and Wizards have died from their own magic because they were not found soon enough to be trained and stabilized."

"Is magic...a disease?" Ed asked his hand shook as he clutched his wife's shoulder; Jane's hand reached his and held it with equal amount of force.

The thought of their daughter and what might have happened had she not received her Hogwarts letter.

"Nothing of the sort." Dumbledore smiled, "It really is a part of us. One could say it's a part of our souls. But you can see why we train young witches and Wizards, why they have to learn about their magic and why child abuse is so severely looked upon. If the magic does not get used there is also the possibility that it will die. If the magic within a Witch or Wizards dies so too does the carrier. In most Child abuse scenarios their magic is smothered and dies killing the child at an early age or it bursts forth uncontrolled wreaking havoc and often death for the child and his or her abuser."

Jane and Ed Granger looked quietly at Harry for a few moments, "But it doesn't always manifest dangerously does it?" Jane asked quietly.

"No," Dumbledore smiled, "Not always."

Ed looked quietly at his wife in askance and Jane smiled at him, "Remember when I told Hermione she couldn't have any cookies before supper? She must have been about five then." She reminisced, "I put the cookie jar on the top shelf and she stood on the floor pouting angrily up at it." She shook her head as she smiled at the memory, "I only left the kitchen for a moment and when I got back Hermione was on the floor finishing off her second cookie with the jar sitting in front of her. I was baffled. There was nothing against the counters to indicate she had climbed up the cupboard...and the jar wasn't broken so it couldn't have fallen." Jane shook her head ruefully, "That must have been her magic manifesting."

"It was." Molly grinned, "Three of my boys did things similar to that as young children. The difference here is they knew they could do it. So their magic was conscious while your Hermione's magic was unconscious."

"And when you said there was no wound?" Ed wondered.

"The cane needs a user in order for it's magic to grow," Dumbledore

stated, "It would never kill the very being that will keep it from losing its magic...So in the process of stabbing, the blades somehow healed Harry at the same time."

"So he's going to be ok then?" Ed Granger asked.

"It would appear so," Dumbledore nodded, "Madam Sinistra is off researching similar situations to find out just that."

The abrupt sound of plastic wheels rolling across the linoleum floor drew everyone's eyes to Sirius who had said little during the entire exchange. He stood quietly and walked out of the room without uttering a single sound. Molly stood a look of anger crossing over her features as Sirius walked out of the door slamming the wood behind him. She was about to storm after the man but her Husband's hand on her shoulder and a look from the standing Remus told her not to.

"I'm sorry," Remus stated quietly, "I'm afraid that until Harry is officially deemed fine Sirius is going to be blaming himself for this whole mess." Remus looked at the door and sighed, "I'd better go talk to him." He scurried out of the room after Sirius.

"If he blames himself so much he should be responsible and stay here until Harry wakes!" Molly grouched.

"Molly," Arthur sighed, "Have you ever known the man to deal with guilt well? Didn't he run after Pettigrew on his own without letting the authorities know what was going on? Isn't that how he landed in Azkaban?"

"I'm sorry," Jane said tiredly, "Azkaban?"

The other Wizards looked at Jane and Ed as though they had forgotten the two were Muggle and immediately leaped into an explanation of Sirius and how he and Harry were involved.

After the story was re-told Ed and Jane granger glanced at each other nervously, "Is he well," Jane began nervously, "After such an ordeal...Is Mr. Black...stable?"

"As stable as anyone going through trauma," Dumbledore stated, "Is Harry 'stable'?" The wise headmaster asked humbly, "He went through a situation that I would deem to be much worse then Sirius's. Sirius wasn't tortured or hunted and even while he lived with Dementors for nearly thirteen years, he was barely affected by the dark creatures on account that he knew he was innocent."

Jane and Ed looked at Harry worriedly while Dumbledore continued, "I believe that asking if Sirius is stable would be equal to asking if Harry hasn't been affected by his own ordeal."

"I'm sorry," Jane said quietly, "I didn't know."

"Well," Dumbledore smiled, "I wouldn't have expected you too. Harry hasn't told anyone the full extent of what he went through over the summer. He told me a little but I suspect it wasn't the full story."

All of the adults watched the young man that they were talking about worry for him etched across their features.

"I suppose he doesn't want us to know the full extent." Arthur Weasley stated quietly, "Knowing him, Harry probably doesn't want anyone to treat him differently then we normally would." Arthur looked at his wife smiling gently and clutching her hand in his own, "No matter how much we want to baby him."

Molly sniffed indignantly at her husband recognizing that he was addressing her, "I won't treat him any differently then I have been." She stated stubbornly her eyes challenging her husband to contradict her words.

"That's all I ask love," Arthur smiled squeezing Molly's hand and

wrestling a small smile out of his wife.

"So what do we do now?" Jane asked, "I'd really like to talk to Madam Sinistra about what happened." Her voice held a light edge to it and she stared at Dumbledore with a stubborn intensity the old Headmaster could place with Hermione's face.

"We wait for now." Dumbledore answered calmly, "Madam Sinistra will appear when she has answers to your questions. Right now we need to wait for Harry to wake up."

The two Weasleys and Grangers decided to do just that. They set up chairs in more comfortable positions around the room, set up a chess board and talked to Dumbledore more about what happened as they waited. Eventually Sirius and Remus returned. Remus sat between Arthur and Jane while Sirius sat silently on Harry's bed next to the sleeping boy taking the child's hand in his own. It wasn't long before Harry showed the first signs of waking up.

The first indication was Harry's body beginning to twitch. He began to move around in his sleep causing Sirius's release of the young man's hand. He moaned a little, his scared face morphing from a peaceful expression to one in pain. His body pulled itself closer together until he formed a small ball on the bed before his eyes began to blink open and adjust. Sirius frowned as he watched his godson awake. The boy's eyes seemed blank at first opening, almost dead, haunted was a better term used to describe them. Sirius recognized the look from looking in the mirror for so many months after Azkaban.

The fact that Harry had folded into a fetal position before awakening told Sirius a great deal about what Harry had been through over that summer that the two of them hadn't yet discussed. Sirius couldn't remember how many times he'd awoken in that very position after reliving any number of horrors from his past in Azkaban. He took his godson's hand in his own again as Harry woke up.

"Um..." Harry looked around him at all the worried and eager faces in confusion, "Hello." He stated for lack of any other words forming in his brain.

It had been a while since all four of his legal guardians as well as his two god fathers, and Dumbledore were together in one room. Harry wondered absently where the rest of the Weasleys were before he remembered that a large percent of them were in school and the rest were most likely on the other side of the world doing their various odd jobs.

"Oh Harry we were so worried!" Molly Weasley began the chaotic chorus of questions and worries from the various adults surrounding Harry's bed.

Harry soon found himself under an onslaught of well-wishers and worry-warts. If he weren't so worried about air he might have felt happy so many people cared about him. As it was though Harry currently couldn't inch a word into the conversation let alone breathe. A pleading look over to Dumbledore made Harry pause. The older man was watching the scene with a look of bemusement. His callused and wrinkled hands with their many gaudy rings were folded in his lap in an image of perfect calm. The wise headmaster sat in his chair with his back strait and his robes held nary a wrinkle in them. He was so perfect looking as he watched Harry's loved ones smother him that Harry felt a very strong urge to strangle the old man.

Dumbledore at last seemed to notice Harry's desperate/frustrated gaze. He raised a bushy white eyebrow in question. Harry raised his own and nodded at the people around him with a sarcastic, "well?"

In response Dumbledore smiled and stood. Harry beamed at his professor before he realized Dumbledore was walking away from Harry to the wall beside the young man's bed. The smile turned to a frown as Dumbledore left his line of vision. There he bent and calmly lifted two short, thin, blood-red, blades walking back to the bed. Harry

stared at the blades with a look of surprise. The well-wishing mob around him backed up and quieted as Dumbledore approached.

"It worked!" Harry said surprised holding out his arms to grasp the two blades as he sat up, "I wasn't sure it would! This is so cool!" He grinned at the darkening expressions around him.

"I'm sorry but," Mrs. Weasley stated.

"What worked?" Jane Granger asked darkly.

Alarm bells rang in Harry's head as he registered the "lecture tone" in Molly's voice. Jane stepped up beside Molly with her arms crossed with a look that again reminded Harry eerily of Hermione. Harry pulled his arms back, much to the amusement of Dumbledore, and shrunk back into his bed pulling his covers up to his eyes regarding both women in sudden foreboding.

"Um..." Harry's muffled voice started tentatively, "I'm...sorry?"

Sirius's dark figure joined the two women in their black expressions, "For what exactly?"

Harry shrunk further under the sheets while Dumbledore calmly produced a phoenix patronus to contact Madam Sinistra.

"For worrying us sick?" Molly asked crossly.

"For causing us to believe you were severely injured?" Jane growled, "Again?"

"For using magic you didn't understand and was unprepared for?" Remus stated calmly.

"Uh...yeah," Harry nodded carefully, "What...you all said."

"You could have been killed!" Sirius snapped, "Killed, Harry! What do you think that would have done to us? To me?"

Harry pulled the covers away realizing in that instant what Sirius was getting at. He'd hurt his Godfather.

"Sirius," Harry started an apology sat shivering on the tip of his tongue.

"Harry is only partly to blame here," A commanding voice growled out from the door, "Though I will admit his decision to listen to a three century old cane was not the smartest decision the boy had ever made...I am more at fault in this ordeal then Harry."

Madam Sinistra swept into the room like a quick moving breeze. Her mahogany robes slapping the ground behind her. She stopped in front of Harry's surrogate family and bowed before them humbly.

"I truly apologize, not just to you who are his guardians but to Harry himself." She stated quietly.

The adults were silent; Sirius in particular was watching Madam Sinistra with an intensity that worried The-Boy-Who-Lived. She stood gracefully and looked each person in the eyes until she got to Sirius. Her eyes stayed longer on his as she addressed the room at large.

"The books that I looked into had very little mention of any cane with the power that this one holds," Sinistra stated, "I wasn't able to look through many as Harry woke up rather quickly. A good sign I think." Her eyes darted to Harry as she stated that last before jumping back to Sirius, "Though when I looked into magical binds I am pleased to say that Harry will not gain any permanent damage from his ordeal."

"You don't know that for sure," Sirius stated quietly.

"No," Sinistra admitted, "I don't, only time will tell--."

"You aren't off the hook yet Sinistra!" Sirius snapped angrily, "Just because you think he's going to be fine doesn't mean he is! You're just trying to cover up your own blasted mistake!" Sirius yelled.

"Sirius..." Harry reached out to touch his godfather to try to calm him down.

Sirius put his arm out protectively stopping Harry's movements to interfere, "You messed up Sinistra!" He yelled, "You put a fifteen-year-old's life in danger by encouraging him to awaken a magic you don't even know about! I trusted you to take care of him!"

"You're right!" Sinistra snapped cutting through Sirius's angry tirade leaving the air between them stilled and quiet, "You are absolutely correct Mr. Black." Sinistra stated more quietly.

Harry was shocked to see real regret on the older woman's face. She suddenly appeared much older than Harry had imagined her being as she regarded Sirius without the walls she always carried around with her. The ancient woman looked nearly naked to Harry even fully clothed as she was. Harry felt that he was finally seeing the true Emily Sinistra beneath the "Madam" persona that she usually displayed.

"I should have at least researched the cane more," Emily said regretfully, "I should not have encouraged Harry to trust the cane before I had a full grasp of what it was. I...messed up."

She looked at Harry and Harry saw something in her he'd never thought he'd see in her ancient eyes, self hate. Harry's eyes widened as she looked away from him.

"I placed my pupil in grave danger as I allowed my pride to overestimate Mr. Potter and myself." She sighed, "I learned long ago not to do that and still I thought I knew what was going to happen

when really I was way off the mark. I didn't prepare him properly."

"Yes you did." Harry interrupted startling all of the adults enough to look at him, "I knew what I was doing even if you didn't..." He looked at each adult, "The blades can't hurt me." He said, "I'll show you." He stated after realizing that no one believed him.

Harry swung his legs off the bed and stood carefully. One hand clutched the mattress as he hobbled forward towards Dumbledore. A hand on his shoulder stopped him and he looked at the arm connected to find a resolute looking Sirius preventing him from moving forward.

"Sirius," Harry stated gently, "I promise I won't get hurt. Just watch will you?"

Sirius hesitated and Remus came up behind him to place a reassuring hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"Let him be Sirius," Remus said quietly.

Sirius backed off and nodded jerkily to Harry. Harry nodded back and took one of the two short swords from Dumbledore. He raised the blade to his wrist and looked carefully at everyone watching before sliding the blade into his skin. A chorus of shock and concern resounded around the room as Harry gently pulled the blade out of his wrist leaving no mark behind. No blood was added to the blade and not a single ounce of pain was seen on Harry's face. The young man didn't even flinch as he demonstrated it one more time watching the faces of his surrogate family.

Harry handed the blade back to Dumbledore and sat in the chair that was situated next to his old headmaster feeling too tired to make his way back to the bed. Walking on his own was hard.

"How did you know the blade wouldn't hurt you?" Remus asked after

a long moment of shocked silence.

Sinistra and Sirius were sitting on the bed both of their faces were white. Harry would have found their identical expressions of shock funny if he didn't know better then to laugh during such a somber moment.

The young man sighed, "The cane told me..." He calked his head scrunching up his eyes as he tried to put into words the feeling of the images that flew into his mind from the Cane, "or at least showed me what it was going to do before it bound itself to me." He explained looking at the blade in Dumbledore's wrinkled hands, "Its voice is silent now but it wasn't. I know it bound itself to me because...I can feel its presence. I know where it is. If I couldn't see it I'd know where it was. I don't know how to explain what I did or how I have the knowledge that I now have regarding the cane...I just. I'll show you."

He held out his hands for the blades and Dumbledore carefully placed them in his palms. Harry wrapped his fingers around the hilts of both blades. They fit so perfectly in his grasp and their weight was well proportioned to his strength. Harry felt they would become heavier as he got stronger but he wasn't sure.

"Could you please get me the shaft of the cane Albus?" Harry asked Dumbledore.

Albus nodded and walked to the wall the ivory tube was leaving against. He picked it up carefully and walked back to Harry handing the boy the ivory and obsidian body of the cane. Harry thanked Albus and held onto both of his blades. He pointed the ends of the blades toward each other holding his arms outward from his body the swords following the insides of his arms. He lowered both points down to the openings of the cane shaft.

Calling his fire to mind Harry allowed the blades to get hot until they glow white from the heat that encompassed them. His hair moved

around his face gently as the cool air of the hospital room met the heat of the blades and reacted to that heat causing a small breeze to turn in the air around Harry. The scarred boy concentrated as he slowly pushed the blades into the cane. Sparks jumped from both ends as he literally un-forged the blades reforming the majestic cane in front of everyone. When both hilts met the ends of the cane Harry turned his right hand back and his left hand forward. With a small click the cane was whole again and the blood red swords no longer existed. The air around Harry stilled and he looked up at his gaping relatives.

"See?" Harry asked, "I'll be fine."

"I won't be." Ed granger stated from the other side of the bed where he collapsed into a chair his face ashen, "Its one thing to know magic exists; it's another entirely too really witness it."

Harry grinned at the Muggle man, "I know what you mean," He smirked, "and just think in two years you're daughter is no longer restricted to just using it at the school. You'd better get used to magic now Mr. Granger."

Ed groaned but he smiled at Harry and winked in good humor.

Right, so the staff only has two functions, it forges the twin blades and stabilizes Harry's core. That's it. It stabalizes his core, meaning he can not channel his magic through it. It does not act as a new wand. It isn't all powerful, it just can't hurt Harry, and Harry will generally only use it to help him walk and maybe hit a few shins while he's at it.

Don't worry folks, I may have given him a weapon, but nothing as powerful as the Elder wand and invisibility cloak. I don't intend to bring those two artifacts up either until they are due. The magic explanations I concocted through research using several different descriptions of magic as it is seen in other cultures and my own

observations. If it is in this story it is widely known between all of the characters. I just never understood how Adult Wizards in the book seemed to know all this complicated magic that is never explained or taught to the children.

That's basically it for my spiel. Hope you all enjoyed it and again, if any questions arise about the cane please let me know.

-Red

The Knot Unravels

The rest of that day was spent in question and answer mode. By the time Harry's family left his head was spinning from what he realized he knew and the newer knowledge that accompanied it. Madam Sinistra and Sirius Black were far from being on good terms but they restrained from any extreme bickering in Harry's presence. The young man now sat silently writing his letters to Hermione and Ron explaining what had happened to him and trying to put down words that could adequately describe the cane. He was finding doing so to be a rather difficult trial.

Harry stopped writing. He placed the quill he was using on the rolling table he usually ate on and leaned back against his pillows with a sigh. Harry was tired. He'd been tired ever since he'd woken up from what he liked to call his "information download". The cane sat beside him on the ground leaning against his bed. He could feel its presence almost as well as he could feel each of his limbs. It was a strange feeling and one Harry knew he'd get used to with time.

He rubbed his forehead, (it felt as though it were too full), and then his eyes as he thought about the letters he was writing to his friends. He missed them dreadfully. Thinking about them reminded him that he was stuck in the hospital still while they were out in the wizarding world exposed to dangers Harry knew could sometimes be unseen. He itched to be there with them, to protect them...

"Hogwarts is safe." He reminded himself, "They'll be fine."

Still he worried about the witch that Hermione continuously complained about in her letters. The one Ron wouldn't talk about and the woman who abused her students for standing up to her as Ron had. It pissed Harry off that he couldn't be there with his best friends to help them with this woman. Hermione despaired about Ron continuing to receive detentions with her. She said that by the end of each evening the back of Ron's hands were pussy and bloody.

Harry swung his legs over the side of his bed grabbing his cane as he stood up carefully. He couldn't think about this. Not about his friends suffering when he was stuck in the hospital where he could do nothing to help them. He walked over to the window listening to each 'clink' of his cane hitting the floor as he made his way to the window's glassy surface. When he reached it he pushed open the glass panes and allowed the cool night air to flow into the room and caress the bare skin of his face. He felt the wind trickle into the room tracing the scars on his skin and lifting the hair off the back of his neck. He'd missed fresh air. There really was nothing like it. It was always playful and light to Harry, like a child that wandered the earth searching for games and stories.

Harry smiled quietly in response to his thoughts and thought again about his friends. He wondered how they were at that moment, what they were doing, and how they were feeling. He wanted so badly to see them to feel their presence next to him again.

A glimmer of feeling that wasn't his had Harry pause in confusion. It was frustration and worry as well as an overwhelming need to study something. Two of the feelings Harry was very accustomed to feeling...but they weren't his.

"Hermione?" Harry wondered belatedly.

As he uttered her name he realized two things in one instant. One was that those feelings had belonged to Hermione. Harry had felt her dark blue aura as clearly as he could feel the cane in his hand. The second thing he realized was that the minute he had uttered her name the feel of her disappeared. It vanished as though it had never been there before.

He leaned further out of the window thinking of Ron. The back of his right palm began to itch and pulse with pain for a single instant and Harry felt a distinct hatred that wasn't his own. It shook him because

he knew it was Ron and he knew Ron was in a great deal of pain and anger. Harry never wanted Ron to feel so intense a hatred again. It was frightening to think of his relatively laid-back friend as having the ability to feel so intense a hatred. Harry leaned back from the window pulling his body away from the fresh air. The pain in his right hand diminished as if it had merely been an illusion.

This made Harry pause in wonderment. He leaned back out the window and thought about Hermione. Nothing happened. No foreign need to study inserted itself into his body. No sense of her entered Harry's awareness at all...

He leaned back inside in disappointment. Maybe he had imagined it all. Maybe his desperation to see his two friends made him think he'd felt them when really he hadn't. Wasn't there a psychological rule or explanation that stated a person could physically feel something if he or she really wanted to feel it? Harry shook his head amused at himself. He was desperately lonely and this was the only explanation for the strange emotion he could come up with.

He pushed away from the window and began to walk back toward his bed when another small breeze brushed against his neck and Harry felt himself plummeting as though he'd tripped on a red wire that glowed at the corners of his vision.

"We have to tell a teacher!" The words felt far away but sounded as though they were right next to Harry's ears.

"It won't work," Ron's voice sounded and felt far away to Harry as though he were standing at one end of a stadium and Ron were on the other, "You see how they all cave to her every will. It wouldn't matter if one of them were upset by it, there's nothing anyone can do about it except stand up to the toad!"

Frustration, worry, despair hit Harry like a ton of sand slamming into Harry's chest, "But a teacher could tell Dumbledore Ron!" Hermione

cried, "Dumbledore could actually do something! He's still the headmaster of this school no matter what Professor Umbridge decrees!"

Harry's heart clenched in his chest, there was a lot more going on at Hogwarts than Ron and Hermione were telling him in their letters. He reached out to Ron pushing his will into clutching that distant voice.

"Standing up to a mad woman with power isn't helping anyone!" Hermione continued to argue, "Did you save Colin from her wrath Ron? Did you help that first year last week by standing up to her?" Fear was pushing Harry down making it difficult for him to reach Ron.

"Calm down Hermione," Harry muttered more to himself than her, "I can't understand you when you're so emotional."

Hermione's mouth shut, her heart sped up and her brown eyes widened as she stared at Ron. Ron stared back at her in confusion wondering why she was standing so still.

"Harry?" Hermione asked tentatively.

Harry's head shot up and he was staring once again at his hospital room in utter bewilderment. That had been real. He had felt Hermione's emotions, heard her voice even occasionally saw through her eyes...Just like Voldemort did with him...

Harry shook and he collapsed to the floor his knees banging on the tile painfully. Harry wanted to throw up desperately but all he could do was dry heave against the ground. His face was ashen and sweaty. A small breeze from the open window touched Harry's back tentatively, almost apologetically. He threw a hand back behind him willing the window to close. The window slammed shut obediently.

Harry clutched the floor in front of him finding it suddenly difficult to breathe. He mentally ran over what had just happened again and

again in his mind; trying to rationalize how it had happened and why. Mentally he began to check his link with Voldemort. The knot had loosened considerably but certainly not enough to influence Harry to overtake his best friends' minds.

He began to slowly relax pushing himself away from panic. Air was still a new concept for Harry magically. Being stabbed with his broken wand had re-awakened all of the carnal magic that had been slowly repressed over years of mental abuse and training his magic to only react to a wand. Harry knew this. It had been explained to him by Madam Sinistra. The first couple of weeks in his magical training had been unlocking Harry's full magical potential. The element that Harry had been born to affiliate with, 'air', was the one he'd worked on the least amount to control and understand. Fire had been the most important thing to control at the time as it was the most dangerous. Yet Harry had to wonder suddenly if that had really been a good thing. He wondered if his affiliation with the element had anything to do with what had just occurred.

Harry shivered and grabbed his cane from where it lay discarded in front of him. He used it to help lift himself from the floor. He used the muscles in his arms, (the arm muscles that were decidedly stronger than they ever had been in his short life due to training with Sinistra), and pulled on the cane pushing his aching knees up. His body shook, his legs shuddered violently before he slowly began to stand again. When he finally did stand his knees were throbbing terribly and a white heat was generating from his muscles. For a moment Harry couldn't see. The pain was more intense than Harry remembered it being when his legs had originally broken. He stood through the pain on sheer will alone not trusting himself to move for fear of another collapse.

When his vision cleared Harry took a couple of shaky steps forward. Inches from the Bed Harry dropped all pretenses of trying to walk and collapsed onto the hard mattress breathing heavily and trying to push the pain back. It took longer than he was used to. It made Harry

wonder if he'd become soft somewhere along the way during his healing. He'd survived a great deal worse pain over the summer.

He reached a shaky hand to the call button on his bed and pushed the button for longer than he had intended. He dropped his hand back to the mattress with a "thwump" while breathing heavily and waited. It took the healer and nurse longer than Harry had anticipated getting to his room. He was exhausted and still shaking by the time the door opened. When the two women hurried into the room for the second time that day they were met with the image of a pale-faced boy sprawled across his bed. His hair was a mess, his white face shined with sweat and his eyes didn't seem to focus on them even though they were facing them.

"Mr Evans--?" The Nurse asked in alarm.

"I fell," Harry stated his voice was steady even as he shuddered and held a distant tone causing both medical professionals to look at each other in alarm, "Can't really feel my body right now...it really hurt a second ago..."

The nurse and healer wasted no time in reaching his bed and re-arranging Harry so that they could examine him more easily. The young man lost consciousness from the shock moments later and the call was made for more nurses to help.

Miles away Hermione sat down heavily on the scarlet chair that was situated behind her when she had been arguing with Ron. Her eyes stared blankly at the floor uncertain. Ron was at her side before she even knew he had moved. His eyes looked over her worried.

"Hermione?" He asked uncertainly, "What? Why did you?" He shook his head trying to organize his thoughts, "Harry?" He asked with emphasis trying to coax an answer out of her.

"I heard him," Hermione said confused, "I heard him as if he were

standing right next to me Ron." She thought carefully on his voice and what had just happened then looked at Ron, "Harry was here Ron, for a moment he was right here!"

Hermione's mind was whirring with questions as she analyzed the few moments that she had been arguing with Ron. She had felt a great deal of confusion which was unusual because Hermione had known exactly what she was trying to argue to Ron at the time. She had also felt a great deal of loneliness that Hermione knew she didn't feel. She had also experienced a longing that had nothing to do with hormones and everything to do with a need to be standing closer to Ron. That in itself was not a strange sensation, (not that she'd ever admit it), but what was strange about it was she had also longed to be closer to herself as well. This was ridiculous because she simply couldn't get any closer to herself. She couldn't get away from herself so how was she supposed to get closer?

Then she'd heard his voice, Harry's voice, and knew then that those emotions had belonged to him. So she knew the "what", but the "how" and "why" were still alluding her.

"Hermione," Ron stated gently, "Harry couldn't have been here," His voice was soft and tight almost as if he thought if he talked any louder to her she might implode, "It's impossible. He's no where near Hogwarts. Are you sure you didn't just--?" Ron stopped and leaned away from Hermione as her eyes had been narrowing further and further as he had spoken.

The youngest Weasley male braced himself noticing the warning signs.

"Didn't just' what Ron?" Hermione asked angrily, "I think I know what I felt, what I heard! He was here! I don't know how or why but I know he was here! It wasn't something I concocted to make me feel better about missing Harry! I felt his emotions as if they were my own! It was real! He. Was. Here!" Hermione growled and stood, "There are

soothing balms in my bag next to you for you're hand Ronald. Use them." Then she turned and marched out of the common room in the likely direction of the School library to soothe her nerves.

Hermione did not actually go to the library as Ron had predicted. Instead she wandered the corridors with no particular destination in mind her thoughts whirling. She was frustrated. No, frustrated wasn't really the best term for what she was feeling. Angry, restless, worried, lonely, scared that Voldemort was out there and furious at the Ministry's staunch belief that nothing was amiss...She felt trapped in the castle, helpless against the unrelenting reign of Dolores Umbridge and confused by what had just happened to her in the Gryffindor common room.

She could still hear Harry's voice echo in her eardrums, "Calm down Hermione," He'd said, "I can't understand you when you're so emotional"...

Just what had he meant by her being 'emotional'? Hermione scowled at the empty corridor then shook her head to herself, that wasn't important. Harry's voice in her head, his presence beside her...now that was important. She understood the feeling of Occlumency. Professor Dumbledore had told her he thought her mental shields were relatively strong for someone who was just learning the art of Occlumency. They were strong as long as she didn't let her temper get the better of her...so why hadn't she felt Harry's mind sail discreetly passed her shields? Or had it been that Harry was all ready in her head? Or had he been able to enter into her head because she'd been in a temper?

Harry had said she was being "emotional"...

Hermione stopped in the stone hallway listening to the distant echoes of students who sat down a level at dinner. Her skin was cooling as her heart settled and her thoughts began to calm working clearer as she mentally ran through the incident in the Common room.

The sounds down the stone stairs were a great deal more toned down this year than years passed. She was on the second floor near one of the corridors that led to the great hall so it wasn't strange for her to hear the edges of young voices as they conversed gaily below her. It was strange that the sound didn't permeate the air as it had in years passed. Hermione remembered a few times last year when the noise would glide all the way up into the library to whisper at her senses and distract her from whatever she'd been currently working on.

At that time the school had housed nearly double the students it usually did with the Tri-Wizard Tournament underway. Last year as opposed to this year students had been excitedly chatting about all the different tasks ahead or all ready done. Hermione smiled grimly to herself remembering how quickly excited chatter had turned to screams of horror and wails of sorrow at the end of the last task. That day was still too fresh for Hermione to forget and she had a feeling that she wasn't the only one who thought so. One never forgets the loss of innocence that comes from watching a human corpse appear on the field before them. Nor especially when said corpse had been one's friend or acquaintance. The fear of that day was still far too fresh a scent and Hermione suspected it had a hand in tainting the joyous sounds below her.

Hermione sighed, leaning against the ancient stone wall next to her and bowed her head as she rubbed her aching temples. So much had happened since that day. So much had conspired since she and Ron had left Harry's hospital room and stepped foot on the school grounds once again. Hermione hadn't been able to approach the Quidditch pitch without feeling sick to her stomach within the first two months of school; an emotional side effect of witnessing Cedric Diggory's body appear on its field.

Of course, few were actually able to approach the Quidditch pitch now seeing as how Umbridge had disbanded all groups, clubs and sports a week after the first Hogsmead visit of the year. That had

been a couple of weeks ago. The Gryffindor house had yet to silence its grief over the loss of their Quidditch team. She'd heard from the Weasleys, (all of which had made it onto this years Gryffindor team), that the captain of the Slytherin team had gotten permission from professor Umbridge to re-instate their team. So it was possible that the Slytherins, at least, were using the pitch to its fullest advantage.

Professor Umbridge had become more than an annoyance for Hermione. The toad-ish woman was using her position at the ministry to change and control Hogwarts to her liking. She was a politician through and through and it was a point of extreme discomfort and frustration for the young clever witch in the hall. To Hermione, Politicians needed to understand one thing, and one thing only about education: To stay out of it. Hermione felt the only people who should ever run a school were the people who knew what they were doing and or talking about: The educators. Umbridge's philosophy about "theory in place of practical" learning was absurd. Maybe it would work in the Muggle world where "spell work" was classified beneath "fairytale" but this was the Wizarding world where the only way to learn about proper Defensive spell work was to use it practically.

Umbridge's argument that there was no need to use defensive spells in her classroom was downright laughable. Every witch and Wizard had a right to learn how to defend themselves from other Witches and Wizards regardless if there were ever a need. The tradition of teaching children how to defend themselves had always been practically executed. Even during peace times when it was unlikely that a child might ever need to use what they had been taught.

Denying this tradition to the young was stupid and dangerous. One doesn't need to be a "dark" witch or wizard to use "dark" spells against someone he or she is angered at. Indeed witches and Wizards have always been notorious for their short tempers and their need to whip out their wands whenever possible. If something wasn't done about Umbridge soon an entire generation of witches and wizards were to going to be inept at the most basic spells of defense.

Considering the war that was brewing Hermione found this thought to be unfathomably frightening. What could she do though? Hadn't Dolores Umbridge all ready expressed her displeasure with students standing up for themselves? The woman was a nightmare, an abusive mother in the skin of a toad. Thank Merlin the woman didn't actually have children. It would be a damaged child indeed that lived with Dolores Umbridge full time.

There had to be something Hermione and the other students could do in order to learn how to protect themselves from the world and even, from Professor Umbridge herself.

A thought, a reminder maybe flickered at the edge of her skull. Harry. She had felt him, he had been with her...He'd also been through more attacks by dark wizards then any child in the school. He'd faced Timmy at least three times, if not more times then she was unaware of, and survived each encounter. Mind, he'd just barely survived a summer running from the dark wizard...

Hermione's mind shied away from the memory of finding Harry's disfigured form in front of her house and grasped desperately at the thoughts trying to form. She wasn't entirely sure it would work, nor was she certain Harry would be willing to help her. Then considering how far away he actually was from Hogwarts...

It would be a challenge but Hermione was sure it was just the sort of challenge that would draw the other students forward. A Defense Against the Dark Arts study hall maybe; where older students helped the younger students learn the spells they should be learning. Hermione knew more then a few young Witches and Wizards who were frustrated by the lack of teaching in Dolores's class room and even more students who would love to go behind Professor Umbridge's back and practice the spells she'd forbidden them.

The Sorting Hat had suggested unity among the houses...what better way to unify the houses then to give them a common scapegoat.

Hermione may not understand what had happened in the common room but as she stood in the hallway listening to the distant chatter of her fellow students a dangerous grin stretched across her lips. She was dreadfully happy it had happened. Hermione turned heading in the direction of the library, there was a great deal of research to be done and she needed to write a letter. It was time to re-unite the school.

"His nightmares are getting worse aren't they?" Asked a nurse to a healer as they tiptoed around the sleeping Harry Potter a week after he had fallen.

"He is," The healer nodded to the young nurse with a worried frown, "He hasn't been sleeping like he should either although his knees have gotten better." She pursed her lips and grinned grimly, "He swears the fall last week has given him a wider range of movement."

"Jokes, you mean," The nurse grinned, "He tends to joke a lot with us. Quite the trouble maker, that one's become." She giggled.

The Healer's frown deepened, "Don't you get any ideas. Isn't he a nit young for an old maid like you?"

"Old?" The nurse asked affronted, "I may not be an Old Maid and I am certainly not old enough to have lost my sense of humor. Of course, he's too young for me! What on earth did you think I was implying?" She shook her head as she walked around Harry's bed smiling at the wizards visiting inside, "I hope you aren't getting too senile in you're old age, Healer." She winked at the grinning young wizard next to Harry's bed with the long red hair and the dragon-tooth ear ring.

The Healer frowned at the nurse but nodded to the large red-headed woman sitting next to the bed and the bushy-haired woman playing chess with the young wizard. She scowled at the wizard's long hair and simply ignored the nurse.

Jane Granger smiled serenely hiding the amusement she felt while listening to the nurse and healers' bickering as she moved her rook to capture one of Bill's knights. She glanced at Molly Weasley knitting quietly on the other side of the bed and then stared at Harry contemplatively.

The fact was Harry hadn't been sleeping. Currently he was under a dreamless sleep draught and had been for the past week. The dreamless sleep draught did little to help him though. The Healers thought that the potion wore off more quickly with him because of the abnormality with his core. They felt the magic clashed a little with his more wild magic. Jane didn't totally understand it but she knew that potions had to be at higher doses for them to work properly on Harry, and even with the higher dose, Jane shook her head.

Nurses had come to Jane and Molly to inform them of the terribly violent nightmares that Harry had been having. They worried that he might be regressing mentally and that might lead to a regression physically. Jane doubted Harry would allow himself to regress in his healing after placing so much work into it but she and Molly had decided to stay near him just in case he got the idea to do so.

Bill had arrived earlier claiming he had a day off from work and nothing to do. The young wizard was welcome company, witty and smart. The young man was able to talk to Harry on more equal terms because he wasn't too old and he wasn't Harry's guardian. Jane was certain Harry appreciated the younger company and the older intellect of Bill Weasley.

The young Curse Breaker often helped Harry on his spell theory work after sessions with Madam Sinistra. The young man's intellect kept

Harry occupied and his comments on one cute nurse or a good looking lady patient made Harry laugh and smile. Jane was happy to see the boy smile as the expression had started to become scarce over the past few days. Unfortunately Bill also fed Harry's mischievous nature. A nature Jane was growing to think was dangerous for the nurses around him.

"I'm going to nip out for a bit," Bill stated quietly.

Molly nodded to her eldest son. He kissed her forehead and nodded to Jane and the nurses reserving a suave grin for the younger nurse. Jane hid a grin as the young nurse giggled quietly into her hand. She watched Bill as he walked out of the room. It was good to bring a bit of light humor into the darkening room.

Molly draped her knitting over her chair and took over Bill's spot in front of Jane. Both women smiled at each other and re-set the chess board wordlessly. There was a weight in the air, one that held both women's thoughts and made the game in front of them into a robotic distraction from the worry that clutched them.

Molly looked at the clock on the wall above the door and then glanced nervously at Jane. It was almost time.

The door opened quickly and a young woman with fiery spiked hair stumbled in. Her long black trench coat was disheveled and wet. She appeared like a wet, disheveled puppy to Jane's tired eyes.

"Sorry I'm late," Nymphadora Tonks apologized breathlessly, "Did Sturgis leave too long ago?"

"Half hour ago," Jane smiled.

"Danm," Tonks cursed.

Molly's lips thinned and she looked up from the chess board at the

young metamorph.

"Sorry," Tonks hair turned a darker red and her cheeks quickly followed, "Erm—how's he doing?" She asked quickly as though to placate the Weasley Matriarch.

"We'll know in a minute," Jane stated as she moved a pawn forward serenely.

Her fingers were shaking; it was hard for her to see what might be coming. She'd grown attached to the boy. It was hard to see Harry in so much unconscious pain.

The door opened again and the Doctor and head Healer as well as a Muggle therapist the doctor recommended walked into the room quietly. They were here to observe Harry while he slept. Their presence almost made Jane Granger all the more worried because it meant that there was something definitely wrong.

The room was silent for ages, or so it seemed to Jane and Molly. The seconds stretched as all occupants stopped pretending to be occupied and watch the sleeping boy. Dreamless draughts only lasted a certain amount of hours.

Molly's hand lay flat on the chess board her pieces forgotten and Jane laid a hand carefully on the Witch's hand. Molly smiled at her gratefully. It took a mother to understand the feeling of trepidation that they two were feeling.

Jane glanced at the clock again two past the last time an attack had occurred yesterday. The small hand clicked to three past, then four.

Harry twitched. His callused fingers slowly began to close clutching the cream sheets beneath him. His biceps grew toned beneath the multitude of scars as his body began to tense up almost as if it new what was to come.

A moan escaped his lips and his brow furrowed stretching the lighting bolt scar upon his forehead. A whimper puffed out of him and his feet moved beneath the covers. The coarse material rubbed against itself as the boy beneath it tried to move as though he were being constrained. He shook his head jerkily and opened his mouth in a great gasp for air.

Jane's hand tightened around Molly's.

Harry's back arched against the bed and he screamed. Lightning flashed outside the window illuminating the artificially lit room followed by a crack of thunder that nearly silenced the screaming child.

Fire trickled out of Harry's skin to lick at the sheets. A nurse pulled them back. Molly and Jane looked away out of respect for Harry's modesty for an instant for the boy was only in his underwear. The healers and nurses had urged him to sleep in his underwear after his second attack. Jane and Molly would have to shop for more underwear for the boy very soon if these attacks kept occurring.

A final gasp had Harry opening his eyes and the fire extinguished. The nurses and healers flocked over to the boy checking his pulse, his breathing and sticking needles connected to tubes into his skin. Molly stood and quietly walked to the side of Harry's bed. Tears began to flow out of his eyes as his body shook. The plump woman was a silent pillar of calm among the nurses and healers running around his bed checking his vitals. It seemed to Jane, watching Molly that the witch was out of time and the Medic's were in time. She seemed to move so slowly compared to them.

When she reached the bed she gently took Harry's hand. The boy almost jerked it away from her until he recognized who was holding it. She smiled reassuringly but Jane noticed her eyes were brighter than they should have been. Harry began to relax and allow the

world to focus around him.

When he realized what was happening around him Jane watched as tears again formed in his eyes and he laughed harshly. Jane clenched her hands together as she watched. His laughter was so fearful, so filled with pain. Jane's eyes closed and she found herself asking herself, how would she feel if she had given birth to the boy on the bed? What was his mother going through wherever she was? Was she watching him and crying?

She glanced at the window and saw the rain run rivulets down the glass and she thought in that moment that Lilly Potter probably was.

Hermione worked furiously over a blank sheet of parchment. Her wand was her pen as she wrote runes into the paper spelling out charms for concealment and a very special charm reserved for secrecy. Her head hurt, more her forehead hurt right between her eyes. She rubbed the spot with the palm of her hand again. It still hurt.

"You've been at that for hours," Ron spoke quietly, but it was enough to make her jump.

"Ron," Hermione whipped around to look at him her eyes wide, "Merlin, don't do that!"

Ron looked at her curiously, "Do what?"

"Sneak up like you did!" She waved her hand in the air as though waving a hand in the air was universal for "sneaking up".

"Ok..." Ron raised both eyebrows and drew out the word slowly, "So," He sat down next to her, "What is it you're doing anyways?"

"You said you wanted to fight back at Umbridge," Hermione stated.

"Duh, we all do," Ron yawned, "What's a piece of paper you've been waving a wand over for the past two hours have to do with it?"

"Obviously standing up to her alone isn't working," Hermione stated.

"Obviously," Ron agreed glaring at the top of his left hand.

"Standing up to her face to face isn't going to work either," Hermione reminded him glancing at his hand in emphasis.

Ron's red, puffy hand went into his pocket and he scowled a little, "Mione..." His voice was becoming impatient.

"The teacher's can't do anything or she threatens them with treason..." Hermione went back to writing with her wand.

Ron sighed loudly, "And?"

"I just figured, as children we are the future of the Wizarding World." Hermione continued, "And that means there's a great deal we can get away with without being accused of being traitors. But why go through the trouble of making our allegiance easy? Why not make things a little difficult first? After all, we are in the finest magical school in Britain, we might as well take advantage of that fact...with or without our dear professors' help."

Ron stared at Hermione for a while not totally understanding her encrypted language. Slowly a grin spread across his face as realization dawned and his eyes lit up with excitement for the first time since the Gryffindor team was disbanded.

"Wicked," He summed up as the full implications of what Hermione was saying began to really sink in.

He leaned forward and watched a small smile quirk at the corner of her mouth.

"How are we...?" he asked.

"I'll tell you when I finish." Hermione stated curtly.

Ron leaned back in his chair in a huff, "Of course." He sighed in resignation.

The Gryffindor common room fell again into silence, the fireplace being the only source of light for two young teenagers that were sometimes much older. Ron watched Hermione work not understanding the glowing runes that sunk slowly into the parchment in front of her but somehow knowing that whatever she was working on was going to be brilliant.

"So..." Ron stated after a few minutes of silence, "Have I told you how absolutely brilliant you are?"

"Go to bed Ron," Hermione didn't even look up from the parchment she was working on, "I won't be done till morning."

Ronald Weasley pouted; his try to trick her into giving him information had failed. He sighed, stretched then with one last curious look toward Hermione he trudged the rest of the way up stairs and into bed. Hermione was left smirking in the darkened common room a plan un-hatching literally in front of her.

With a final twitch of her wand the last rune sunk into the parchment. The paper glowed briefly for a single moment and then dimmed. Hermione reverently folded the parchment into a small square and slipped the square into her school bag directly next to a sealed envelope which she intended to mail in the morning.

She stretched throwing her arms into the air. Her head full of long bushy hair fell back as she arched her spine and a sigh escaped her lips. She dropped her arms to her side and slumped back into the

chair she sat on her brown eyes gaining a golden glint of determination. Tomorrow would be a busy day. She had rumors to start and a Hogsmede weekend to plan as well as study for her exams and somehow keep everything that she was planning from within earshot of a certain toady professor. Oh, right, and she had to tell Ron what was going on. She grinned wryly, can't forget that.

She stood shouldering her pack and walked quietly up to her dorm. The beginning of something was stirring within the bowls of her awareness. Nervousness for what she was about to do perhaps? Maybe, she admitted.

A strength had blossomed in her along with a sense that she was finally doing something to curb her frustration with life as it currently was. Action had become a thing to look forward to and a thirst for that action had Hermione's mind working faster then it had since the beginning of this school year. One thing was for certain, if her plan worked there would never be need for worry about their OWL exams. That thought had Hermione smile as she slid into her bed and fell into sleep.

Right, so there you have it. Timelines are evil. I hope it flows well and appologize if it's a tad confusing. I hope it was as entertaining for you reading it as it was for me writing it. Any information about updates are on my profile page. As always constructive criticism is welcome. Thanks for reading!

-Red

Hatching Plans

Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. That's what the Muggle shrink was calling it. Harry shook his head in annoyance. He knew what was happening to him and why. The Muggle psychiatrist knew little about what had happened to him and Harry didn't trust the man enough to tell him. Despite the unbreakable oath the Shrink had taken. He stared at the textbook beneath him with unseeing eyes.

A letter sitting innocently next to his bed lay opened and unanswered. Harry simply didn't know how to answer Hermione's questions. He was tired. He couldn't sleep. His dreams revolved around traumatic memories he didn't want to think about and a high sinister laugh with red snake-like eyes that never blinked. Then there was that door. There had been a door appearing in his dreams in a hallway he didn't know and had never before seen in his life. The door was both revolting to think about and dreadfully intriguing. Harry didn't know what could possibly be behind it, he didn't want to know, but it continued to appear in his dreams with a surge of longing Harry simply couldn't place. No, Harry just couldn't talk about training techniques with Hermione as of yet.

There was only one thing Harry needed to know about what was happening to him to understand that there was so much more to the problem than post traumatic stress...There was another mind there, crouched at the edges of his awareness just waiting to be released. Harry snorted to himself. If he told that to the psychiatrist he was sure to be labeled Schizophrenic or worse.

"You're not studying," A rough masculine voice deadpanned next to Harry's bed snapping the tortured young man out of his musings.

Harry's head snapped up, "Sirius!" he exclaimed happily pushing aside his text so that he could properly hug his Godfather.

"Hey Pup," Sirius clutched his godson to him noticing the difference

in the young man's muscles from the last he'd seen him.

Harry had gotten stronger then he remembered. He'd filled out quite a bit more then the Animagus could remember. It had been too long since he'd come to visit.

Sirius sat on Harry's bed and the boy quickly scooted over to give him more room to do so. "So what's this I hear from the doctors about Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome?" Sirius asked.

Harry scowled at Sirius causing the older man to bark out a laugh.

"It's not funny," Harry growled.

"Maybe not," Sirius grinned, "But that look you just gave me definitely was."

Harry rolled his eyes, "Yeah, sure. Ha, ha."

"Ooo," Sirius whistled, "Careful, I would never suspect you were using sarcasm."

"Really?" Harry deadpanned.

"Really," Sirius smirked.

Harry stared at his Godfather stoically for a few silent moments before his lips twitched and a grin broke his scowl. Sirius laughed and affectionately mussed up Harry's all ready mussed up hair.

"Hmmm..." Sirius grinned, "bed head does you well kid."

"Shove off," Harry smiled pushing his Godfather's arm away half heartedly.

"So what's really bothering you kid?" Sirius asked casually placing

his arm around Harry's shoulders.

"Dreams," Harry fiddled with the edge of his t-shirt, "At least at first," he fidgeted.

"Dreams can be brutal," Sirius nodded understandingly, "Merlin knows I've had my fair share of nasty dreams."

Harry nodded, "Yeah, but this is more than that..." He looked at Sirius with a worried expression on his face, "I need to talk to Dumbledore, but I don't know how to--."

"Contact him?" Sirius nodded, "It'd be risky for you or even me to try to contact Dumbledore." He narrowed his eyes in thought as he contemplated the problem Harry had just presented him, "I suspect that with that Umbridge woman at Hogwarts the floo networks are being watched as well as the Owlry..."

"Why?" Harry asked feeling a familiar frustration begin to tighten his chest, "What's going on in the Wizarding World Sirius that has the ministry feeling they need to watch a bunch of kid's letters to their parents?"

"It's not the kids letters their watching Pup, besides, you wouldn't believe the reason if I told you," Sirius sighed shaking his head, "I barely understand it myself. I'm no politician. All I know is that ever since the Tri Wizard Tournament it's like Wizards and Witches of our world are going mad. It's fear that's driving the madness, that's obvious at least, but this madness is driving otherwise harmless people to become unstable tyrants."

"What do you mean Sirius?" Harry asked quietly frowning, "I'm young but I'm not stupid. I know you're trying to soften information for me."

Sirius winced, "You're right. It's just with your health and everything I felt it was better if you didn't know the full of what was going on. Mind,

there are some things I'm not...permitted to tell you even if I wanted too...But you have the right to know what's going on out there." Sirius pulled the Daily Prophet out of his cloak and handed it to Harry with a snort, "Molly'll kill me if she finds out I gave you that."

Harry nodded, took the paper and stared openly shocked at the front page. Sirius watched as Harry carefully read through the front page his expression hardening with each word he read.

Sirius stood in search of vending machines allowing Harry time alone to read through the paper. When he returned to Harry's room the boy was no longer in his bed. He stood with the window flung wide open allowing the wind to ruffle his long unruly hair. The paper lay folded neatly on the bed in the space Harry had previously occupied. Sirius took one glance at Harry's stiff profile against the darkness of the evening light and leaned against the door taking a swig of the fruit juice he'd found in the vending machine. Not as good as ale...or any fruit he'd ever actually had...but it would do.

"Who is Dolores Umbridge?" Harry asked without turning around.

"Fudge's right hand," Sirius spat, "She's a wolf in lambs clothing, main spokeswoman against any intelligent creature that isn't Witch or Wizard and Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. The woman's a nasty piece of work."

Harry turned around surprised, "Then why did Dumbledore hire her?"

"Word is he was out of options and the Ministry probably had a hand in pressuring him to give Umbridge the job," Sirius answered.

Harry sat down on the chair next to the window, his expression reminded Sirius of his own at times; haunted, years above his age. Sirius sighed tiredly. His sigh was echoed across the room by the window.

Both males looked at each other and grinned. It wasn't a happy grin, not by any comparison; it was more of an understanding. The two of them had seen the darkest parts of life, it was something they shared with each other and both gained comfort from it. Neither Harry nor Sirius needed to talk about their ordeals with each other; they simply knew the other understood.

"I need to get back into the Wizarding world," Harry stated heavily.

"Ok," Sirius agreed then turned a sharp gaze upon his Godson, "Why?" He asked casually finishing off his artificial juice.

Harry looked at Sirius startled for a moment. He went back to the age of fifteen in an instant with his confusion.

"Why?" Harry asked incredulously, "They're calling Dumbledore incompetent! I don't even want to know how they know about the Durselys but I can see what they are trying to imply. These idiots are blaming Dumbledore for my death! Stating Hogwarts isn't safe with him as headmaster! Someone is trying to take Dumbledore's power away from him..." Harry stood and clutched his cane pacing back and fourth in front of the window.

The wind outside grew a little. Sirius raised an eyebrow toward his Godson.

"Yes," Sirius stated, "Someone is trying to take power away from Dumbledore. But Dumbledore is not by any means the all powerful Wizard everyone believes. If you remember he was one of the first to accept my guilt over James and Lilly's deaths."

"He was also the first to accept you're innocence," Harry countered.

"Which shows that he has enough wisdom to make amends for his mistakes," Sirius countered calmly, "He admitted his mistake to me when I was locked up that night in Hogwarts."

"The Prophet is making him look like a senile old fool," Harry growled.

"The Prophet is in the pocketbook of the Minister of Magic," Sirius informed Harry.

"But I'm not dead!" Harry protested, "He's the only one spouting any sense in the world and Fudge is using my supposed death to make people believe that Voldemort isn't back! How's that for fucked up?!" Harry yelled, "Fudge's power game is allowing innocent people to be killed!" Harry's right fist was balled tightly to his side, the knuckles clutching his cane had become Ivory in hue and the wind coming from the window whipped at Harry's hair as he stared at his godfather desperately, "If I go back to the Wizarding world none of this would be an issue! People would know Sirius!" He shouted shaking, "They'd know he was back and they'd be able to prepare themselves! If the ministry would stop blaming Dumbledore for something he couldn't control--!" He turned whipping his head back and fourth, "It's useless, useless!" Harry gasped, "Blaming Dumbledore is useless when it's so obvious its--!"

Sirius watched his godson carefully feeling that the boy was a damn that was about to break.

"It's me!" Harry shouted into the wind with both hands clutching the cane in front of him, "I brought the devil back! I am the cause! Not Dumbledore!" He threw the cane down and gasped out the bubble of air that had threatened to choke him.

The wind stilled and Harry was left standing on his own gasping. His legs shook though his shoulders didn't move. He glared out the window as though he could see past the city lights and buildings around him to another place. His chest rose and fell with short, strained, breath. The knuckles at his sides were clenched white as his anger cooled and a foreign despair slammed into him. Harry

stumbled and clutched the windowsill. Sirius had dropped the tin juice can to the floor in shock staring at his Godson with his mouth open. Harry's eyes grew moist as they glared at his scarred hands in disgust.

"It's my blood that brought him back," He said quietly, "Blame needs to go where it's due."

For several long seconds Sirius stood at the door now understanding why he was having these dreams, why the child was regressing back into his shock. How long had the boy held this guilt inside of him? Sirius was no stranger to guilt and he understood then that at that moment Harry was a great deal less like his father and more, much more, like Sirius. That would have to change. Now.

"No," Sirius stated staring at his godson with a hard stare.

Sirius pushed himself off of the door and strode toward the young man clutching the window. Within seconds Harry was enveloped by the strong yet still frail arms of his Godfather. Harry closed his eyes painfully and wrapped his arms around Sirius's arms clutching them and the reality that they represent.

"Don't you ever say that," Sirius growled his scraggly chin smashed against the back of Harry's head, "Did you create the ritual? Were you willingly a participant?"

"No!" Harry cried, "But that's the thing isn't it?" Harry laughed bitterly, "He needed an 'enemy's blood unwillingly taken'! I was that enemy! It was my blood taken to re-forge Voldemort's body!"

Sirius turned Harry around to stare the boy in his face, "Then he could have used anybody's blood!" Sirius stated looking into Harry's eyes, one so much like his mother's, it broke the old dog's heart, "Don't you see Harry?" Harry shook his head negatively, "Even one of his own death Eaters could have been a candidate for his

resurrection! Did you really think Voldemort had anyone in this world who was not his enemy?"

"Well I could have done something!" Harry yelled, "I- I could've--there had to have been something! I tried to save Cedric and we both know how well that turned out! What was I to do? Blast Pettigrew to Merlin knows what with a spell I'd never learned? Isn't that what I was meant to do? What the "Boy Who Lived" was supposed to do?"

"No!" Sirius growled shaking Harry once in emphasis before relaxing his grip on Harry's shoulders, "No, Harry," he stated more gently, "No one expects you to do anything! You're just a boy, Harry! Just a boy. You did everything in your power," he pleaded with Harry trying to make him understand, "You wouldn't be standing in this room, alive, if you hadn't."

Harry and Sirius stood glaring at each other for a long moment. The still in the room made the staring contest draw out until both men calmed. The silence stretched languidly breathing slowly as the tempo in the air changed from tense electricity and desperation to resignation.

"There's only one person responsible for all that has happened to you," Sirius said heatedly, but quietly, "Just one. We both know who that is. Don't you dare blame yourself for his twisted schemes! That isn't you. It will never be."

Harry stayed standing straight as a rod angrily for a whole minute before his lower lip trembled and he gasped leaning forward. He clutched his Godfather and they both slowly fell to their knees on the hard, cold tile. Tears fell down Harry's cheeks though he didn't cry as he clutched his Godfather to him. Sirius clutched Harry almost as tight as Harry held on to him. His dark eyes stared blankly out the window behind Harry as the young man shook against him.

"Sirius," Harry's voice was strained, "I feel him. He's there just at the

corner of my mind. The connections getting...What if that connection enables him to...to turn me into something?"

Sirius shook his head, "It's you're mind Harry. In the end it's you're mind, not his. You are the only one with the power to control it. Remember that."

Harry nodded and slowly a thoughtful expression came over his face. His eyes widened as something inside clicked with what Sirius had said and a broad grin broke his sad expression.

"That's it," He said in amazement, "That's what I've been trying to learn, to understand! It's why I can throw off the imperious curse!"

Harry pushed away from Sirius took two steps away from the wizard and stumbled. Sirius caught his Godson with surprise.

"Hold there Pup!" Sirius stated easing Harry back to the window while he retrieved the cane on the floor, "Did you forget you're handicap?"

"Heh," Harry grinned sheepishly as he took the cane from Sirius, "Guess I did."

Sirius glared a little at the cane as Harry walked to his bed and sat down at the foot of it. He still didn't trust the object. Harry sat down on the edge of his bed and waved his hand at his trunk. The trunk popped open with a creak. Sirius watched Harry with some surprise as he wiggled a finger at the trunk and a stack of books obediently flew onto the bed. Sirius hadn't known how well a hold Harry had gained over his magic.

"Ha!" Harry grinned pulling a book out of the magicked stack, "This is why I've been having difficulty learning Occlumency. I was so worried about Voldemort's mind that I completely forgot about my own!"

Harry grinned at Sirius in an imitation of Hermione that had the Wizard fighting himself not to laugh.

"I think I can finally get through this stupid chapter!" Harry stated gratefully, "It's so bloody confusing!"

Sirius did bark out a laugh at that. A little less like Hermione then.

"It's just," The open book dropped slowly onto Harry's lap, "How do I know where my mind ends and his begins?"

"Oh I'm sure you'll notice by the time the slime touches you're defenses," Sirius said absently as he lay down on the bed beside Harry.

Harry snorted in amusement and shot his Godfather a blank look, "Not even a bit funny. You need to get out more."

"I need to stop hanging around snot nosed brats who talk back to their elders," Sirius said agreeably.

Harry threw one of his texts at his Godfather.

"Ow!" Sirius cried in mock pain, "My own Godson! Such violence!"

Another book slammed into Sirius's head causing him to yelp in pain for real.

"Merlin!" Sirius cried, "Hermione would not be happy to learn you were using books as weapons!"

"Not weapons," Harry grinned, "Tools."

"Do you really think he's ready?" Remus asked Sirius that morning after Sirius's visit with Harry.

"Yep," Sirius nodded downing the coffee in the mug in front of him, "The kid's been ready. His magic is stable and he's as well as can be expected."

"But what about his mental health Sirius?" Remus's face was drawn and tired.

He was slumped in his seat staring despondently at Sirius over a mug of pepper-up potion. His graying hair was scraggly and unkempt and the tie he'd put on that morning was skewed over his Muggle button up work shirt. He was going out that day to interview at a Muggle high school for a job and needed all the pepper up he could get.

Sirius didn't answer Remus at first, his grey eyes stared stoically at the mug cradled in his hand "How well do you think he's going to be when he's cooped up in a hospital room with nothing to think about but the past?" He asked quietly, "He's carrying around horrors that most adults couldn't face under normal circumstances. Then there's the ridiculously large amount of miss-placed guilt he holds for Voldemort's return to life." Sirius looked up at Remus sadly, "Harry needs to be in a safe environment with plenty of distractions. It would help that it was a familiar place, one he knew well with many who would willingly help him out if he needed it. You know the professors will help him with whatever they possibly could. Remus, you know the school is the best place for him."

Remus frowned at Sirius straitening his tie, "I'll call the Grangers and floo Molly. They can get a hold of Dumbledore and we can discuss it together."

Sirius raised an eyebrow at his old friend his tone surprised, "You don't think Hogwarts is the best place for him right now do you?"

Remus took one last look at his bangers and eggs, the breakfast he'd made for himself not ten minutes ago, and pushed them away with a

grimace, "I'm not entirely sure what my feelings are about throwing Harry back into the wizarding world."

Sirius was silent but his jaw was set in a stubborn scowl.

Remus sighed, "listen Sirius, I can't talk about this right now. I know why you want him to go back to school, but I say we shouldn't rush things. Today will be a trial on its own. Now if you will excuse me, I have an interview with a man who wishes to throw me into the middle of a pit of raging hormones."

Sirius chuckled as Remus stood and grabbed his coat, "Right, be careful Moony."

"Always," Remus sighed.

Harry's eyes were shut tight as he concentrated. He couldn't feel his hands as they rested on his knees. He couldn't hear or really smell anything outside of his mind's awareness. Harry was learning something more valuable than any practical spell or lesson could have prepared him for. He was learning about the inner workings of his own mind. He was so deep in his memories that he never noticed the soft click of shoes on tile flooring. Madam Sinistra recognized the signs of deep meditation and she smiled when she noticed how much he had mastered.

"But not far enough," She muttered to herself.

She smiled quietly to herself and sat down cross legged in front of Harry. Her grey eyes locked onto his still form and she stretched her aura out feeling along his until she met an opening. Carefully she probed into Harry's subconscious opting to stay at the edges and simply wait to see how long it took him to notice her. His awareness had grown dramatically since he first began to learn Occlumency and the art of meditation. She was proud of how far he'd come. She decided to test him to see whether or not he was ready to move on to

the next level.

Let me see how long it takes you to notice an intruder...She thought spreading out her awareness to gently probe Harry's defenses.

She wasn't disappointed as she felt a strong will probe her curiously. It was about at that moment that a wall went up around her effectively cutting off Harry's mind from her own. Sinistra smiled as Harry slowly opened his eyes. He blinked them a few times as they came out of their unfocused state to stare at her.

"Sensei?" He asked confused, "Was that--?"

"Yes," Sinistra nodded at Harry in approval, "That was me. You did a beautiful job at closing yourself off from me."

Harry smiled slowly still seemingly else ware.

"But," Sinistra frowned, "You go too deeply into yourself." She watched as Harry's eyes began to drift closed.

He was still mostly within his own mind. Sinistra frowned. She needed to teach him that going so far into oneself when there were possible dangers around him would be a grave mistake.

But how to do so without causing bodily harm to her pupil...? She wondered.

A slow, feral, grin manifested upon Madam Sinistra's pale features. She just might have a solution...

Harry awoke from within himself with a feeling that something wasn't quite right. The ground beneath him was warm, hot even and it had a gritty feel to it not unlike sand. The air was hot too. So hot that it seemed to sink in and sear his flesh. It was not like fire, nothing like fire, but it was like the heat from the light fire gave off...Sunlight

perhaps? Come to think of it, his eyes though closed looked red as though a very bright light hovered just outside the lenses...

Bright hot sunlight and sand...

What the bleeding hell--?

Harry's eyes snapped open and then snapped shut. Yes, that had been the sun. A very bright sun.

Harry's eyes opened more cautiously this time allowing the normal pupil of his green eye to adjust to the light. What he found when he did though make him wish his eyes were closed again.

He found sand.

Endless amounts of sand that stretched before him in waves.

Harry Potter slowly stood. His mouth dropped open in shock. He looked up and wished he hadn't. There was not even a hint of cloud in the sky. He had to squint to see the blue horizon touch the golden sand.

The wind picked up behind Harry pelting the back of his neck arms and legs with sharp grains of rock. Harry looked down at his legs realizing he was in his boxer shorts and a t-shirt in what looked like the middle of the Sahara desert.

Harry couldn't help the expletive that escaped his mouth in that moment. His mouth opened and closed for a full three minutes before the glimmers of fear began to penetrate his troubled senses and his knees began wobbling from his weight. He didn't even have his cane.

"Shit," Just didn't seem a strong enough word for the situation he'd found himself in.

Hermione paced nervously in front of the run down moldy bar table a piece of rolled up parchment clutched in her hand. Her bushy hair bounced with each step she took and her brown eyes were riveted to the musty wooden floor beneath her.

"You did spread word around?" Hermione shot Ron a glare.

Ron sat in one of the rickety chairs at a moldy circular bar table. His feet were planted lazily upon the top of the table. His eyes were leveled at Hermione and they followed her as she paced back and forth in front of him. He resembled a large red cat to Hermione's nerve-wracked senses.

"Yeah, but don't expect much," Ron stated.

His eyes shot to the door for an instant destroying his lazy performance. He was just as nervous as Hermione was. She stopped walking to look at the door with him. A short group of first years walked past laughing at something they all must have found funny and continued walking out of site. Both young wizards within the Hogs Head pub relaxed back into their previous states. Ron continued to play the bored, careless, youth and Hermione continued to burn a rut into the floor.

The door opened allowing a gust of cold wind to sweep into the room. A heavily cloaked figure stepped in covered in multiple hats and scarves. Stringy blond hair peeked out of the multi layered ensemble of hats on an otherwise petite head. Large blue eyes that appeared as though they were open far too wide to be natural peered at Ron and Hermione owlshly. They were the only part of the figure that could be seen.

Hermione stared openly at the young witch in front of her and Ron nearly fell off his chair in surprise.

"No one else is here yet?" Came a muffled dreamy voice from behind the mass of scarves covering the witch's neck and most of her face.

Hermione had to clear her throat before speaking, "No Luna," She smiled, though the muscles felt tight, "You're the first."

"Other than the two of you of course," Luna bobbed her head toward Hermione.

Though with all the fabric constructing her movement it really was more of a twitch.

"Wonderful," Luna clapped her gloved hands together and sat down in the chair next to Ron, "Lovely day isn't it?" She asked him.

"What?" Ron asked not understanding her muffled words.

Luna pretended not to hear him. Instead she dreamily raised a hand toward the bar of the pub and waved.

"One Butter Beer, please," She stated.

The Bar man either didn't hear her or he simply wasn't listening. Luna brought her hand down and looked at Hermione without focus. Hermione stared back in question.

"Don't worry," Luna said as though talking to somebody behind Hermione, "Your plan is brilliant. It should grow well beyond what you predict."

"I haven't told you my plan yet," Hermione said patiently.

"Sure you have," Luna's gaze focused suddenly striking into Hermione's eyes with a painful intensity, "You're quite loud when you don't mean to be."

She turned away from Hermione as a butter beer was placed in front of her by the Bar man. Luna brought the warm cup up to take a sip and met resistance in the form of her many scarves. She giggled and quickly put the cup back down.

"I suppose I should take my scarves off," She stated dreamily and began to unwind the multiple layers from around her face and neck.

Hermione and Ron glanced at each other incredulously.

For ten awkward minutes Hermione and Ron watched Luna speak to them, though the conversation was rather one sided. Soon, students began to trickle into the room. Most of them were from Ron and Hermione's year group but both Gryffindors were surprised to find upper classmen and a few of the lower years in the group. One little first year hanging onto the arm of a Ravenclaw third year was a Slytherin. The amount and diversity of the small group that had appeared to hear Hermione speak was astounding.

Hermione and Ron exchanged a nervous glance. Luna smiled serenely and slid off of her stool to help the bar-tender carry platters of Butterbeer to the other students. When each of the students had received a mug and paid the bartender Luna sat down on the stool next to the one Slytherin boy. The first year boy stared at Luna with eyes almost as wide as her own.

Hermione fidgeted nervously waiting for a chance when everyone was settled down to start speaking.

"Right," She began.

The door opened to allow two more students a sharp eyed raven claw boy and Ginny who grinned at Hermione and Ron before sitting down.

"Uh," Hermione smiled hesitantly, "Do you all know why you're here?"

She asked uncertainly.

"Because the note that was passed around said you wanted to get back at the Toad." George Weasley winked at Hermione.

Hermione frowned, "Well yes," She said, "And no. I don't want a confrontation..."

A loud chorus of confusion and disagreement arose. The Bar man scowled at the noise that was being made. The door opened to allow two older students. One wore the Slytherin green while another wore the Ravenclaw Blue. The two of them moved to the back of the audience and leaned against a wall observing the scene in silence.

"Listen!" Hermione yelled, "You all know what happens when we confront her!"

"This time it'll be different!" One kid cried.

"Yeah!" Another supported, "There're a lot more of us!"

"She can't possibly put all of us in detention!" Someone yelled defiantly, "I thought we were going to do something to get rid of her!"

"Well we can't!" Hermione waved her hands in the air in front of her for emphasis, "She's with the ministry, the right hand of Fudge. How do you propose we confront a witch with that kind of political power?"

"Hermione's right," Ron stood up behind her, "The old bag has powerful backing. No matter what we do she's still the adult, and we're still just kids. I've been learning that." He held up the back of his right hand where looping scars shown white against his skin.

"How many of you have been learning the same thing?" Hermione asked.

Several hands went up all with shiny pink letters looping across their skin.

"The other professors can't question her," Hermione stated, "They risk being accused of treachery against the ministry if they do! Hogwarts is a school, and we are its students. We can't question a professor any more then we can defy the Headmaster...but we do have a right to our education, and that is exactly what we are going to reclaim!"

Hermione stared challengingly at the assembled students, "Obviously asking questions and learning what we need to know to defend ourselves is essential regardless of whatever may or may not be there. The fact is that any magic, dark or light, can be used to hurt any one of us. One could use Wingardium Leviosa to fling another across a room." Some students glanced at each other, "If a witch or wizard gets angry enough," Hermione warned the incredulous looking students, "They could easily loose control of their magic and attack any one anywhere! It is important to know how to defend ourselves. Muggings happen in the Wizarding world just as they do in the Muggle one only they are more dangerous here aren't they? Have any one of you ever been to Knockturn Alley? Or have you ever witnessed a dual in the middle of the street over some petty argument?"

Some of Hermione's audience glanced at each other and nodded solemnly while others frowned in thought.

"It is our right to know how to defend ourselves!" Hermione stated, "But an entire generation is going to grow up without this most basic of knowledge, without this right. As a student who enjoys learning I can not stand on the sidelines and allow one witch to place a handicap on my ability to defend myself. Nor can I allow her to screw up my chances for my future. How can we expect to excel in our NEWTS, or our OWLs, when we can't get a practical learning of what we are being taught?"

She could see that several students were beginning to agree with her, especially after she used the Wizarding Exams as her main excuse.

"The best way to learn defense has always been through practical instruction." Hermione continued pacing in front of her audience like a ringmaster, "Thanks to Umbridge we all have a thorough knowledge of the theory of defense. I propose we build on that knowledge and help each other. Teach each other what Professor Umbridge has not. So that we may better protect ourselves, our future, and our world."

Murmurs of agreement and excitement rose as students talked among themselves discussing Hermione's speech. Some of this murmur was argument. Why should they help each other? Why should they learn defense when they didn't need to defend themselves? Why wasn't theory enough? Wasn't their homework all ready to large an amount of work? What would they need defensive spells at school for?

"Oi!" Ron yelled silencing the group; his hands were clenched to his sides as he stood and glared at the students, "Do you or do you not remember the end of last year? When two brothers of Hogwarts arms disappeared under the noses of all our professors and those ministry officials?"

Silence reigned. The noise was cut abruptly; the quiet a shear against the rotted floors of the Pub.

"Do you remember Cedric Diggory?" Ron asked more quietly.

Feet shuffled on the floor the sound muffled by the defining silence that stretched across each youthful face. A breath hitched in pain at the name uttered by Ron. Blood shot eyes framed my silky black hair gazed at Ron sorrowfully.

"That happened here." Ron said quietly, "At Hogwarts. The walls have been safe, they've always protected us. But people—people like Umbridge," He snarled her name, "Are in our walls. People we can't fight openly."

"Hogwarts is safe," Hermione admonished Ron.

He sat down with a huff and a frown, "Harry wasn't safe."

The room seemed to hitch it's breath as twenty-some eyes looked anywhere but at Ron and Hermione. Everyone knew how close the trio was. Many of them still thought Harry to be dead and so misinterpreted the understanding hand Hermione placed on Ron's. A choked sob broke out of Cho Chang's throat

"You're right Ron," Hermione said quietly not looking at the rest of the students, "Harry and Cedric Diggory were not safe. It's a lesson that tells us something about the outside world. I for one am going to take that lesson to heart, and I am not going to turn my back on my fellow classmates just because of house rivalries." This she said while looking at the small Slytherin first year smiling sadly, "Cedric and Harry knew this, in the end. They traversed the maze together, in honor of Hogwarts."

The boy nervously pulled himself further into the arms of his Ravenclaw sister.

"What did you have in mind?" The calculative Slytherin at the back of the room asked.

His voice was as lazy as his stance but his eyes were sharp as they regarded Hermione.

Hermione's smile was predatory, "I propose an inter-house, inter-year alliance." She grinned, "We all hate Umbridge, and we all need to excel in our exams, so let's use that as a uniting force. The

older students will help the younger students learn what we all learned our first year. The third years will help the second years, the fourth years the third, son on and so fourth. It will be like a giant, underground study group where the only people we can rely on will be each other. We have to keep it from the professors so that word never reaches Umbridge. Imagine her surprise when we all score Outstandings in all of our exams."

"How will we organize this 'giant study group'?" The pompous looking Ravenclaw asked incredulously, "There are way too many students for this to possibly work!"

"No, no, no...That's not what I meant." Hermione waved a hand at the other students and brought her other hand to her temple thinking.

How could she explain this...?

"I thought we'd be the core," Hermione stated nervously, "The study group would be us. Not millions of us, just those of us who are here now and any that may want to possibly join us in the future. You see what we would do, us I mean," She indicated the room and students at large, "Is find a place to practice. We would be our own teachers. Honing our skills based upon the collective knowledge of everyone else in our little...group." She grinned sheepishly, "At this place we'd work together, hopefully you older students will help the younger students perfect their defense. For the older students who have their skills perfected and need to help their peers we could take this time to be a study group. For tests and such."

"Our focus is kind of selfish," Hermione continued, "Basically what we are doing is making sure we learn defensive spells. Together we can figure out the correct way to do this on our own. I'm not expecting anybody to form groups outside of this one. All I ask is that the one rule outside of our study group would be if anyone outside asks one of us for help with a problem concerning study then we help them out. Don't let it be known there's a secret group practicing

spells that shouldn't be illegal, just be there."

Her hands were folded as she gazed at the sea of faces in front of her uncertainly, "I suppose I'm relying heavily on the hope that you older students will help us as much as you can. I know most of you have exams to worry about, as my group does too but I'm hoping you're just as tired of Umbridge's lack of educating as I am."

The chatter rose again and Hermione looked at Ron nervously. The idea had been hatched out into the open, now all the two Gryffindor students needed to do was wait.

The Closer We Come

"Ok Harry." He groaned, "That was a waste of bloody time and effort." Harry had begun talking to himself after the fourth hour of exposure to the relentless heat and endless blue skies.

He was covered from head to toe in sand. It was unfortunate to think about all of the sand that had found its way into the more unsavory parts of his anatomy but it couldn't really be helped as he was wearing only boxer shorts. He had tried to create a shelter by solidifying the sand around him. It had worked for a moment even...but then a large gust of desert wind had slammed into it and the solid aspect of the shelter had failed.

It had taken a half hour and more magic than it should have needed to build it. It had taken three seconds and no magic what so ever to destroy it. Aka: it had been a "bloody waste of time and effort".

Harry's lips were chapped and peeling. His lungs hurt every time he breathed; a side effect of inhaling sand. His legs had literally stopped working. They refused to bear his weight a moment longer. All he'd been doing since had been crawling along in the sand hoping that if he continued far enough he might at least find some water.

It appeared that his luck, never a thing he'd ever gamble with, was completely dried out. What he couldn't understand was how he felt like he was still in his hospital room. Harry giggled deliriously. His pale skin was burned almost brown in some places. It hurt to move for fear of stretching that burned skin. Harry was a child of England, and as such should never, ever be exposed to so much sunlight in one sitting. His pale skin simply could not handle it.

He thought a shadow had passed over him. His heavy eyes opened more fully from the squinty state they had fallen into. He blinked. There was a woman frowning above him. Her hands sat squarely on curved, bony hips. Her dark hair with its strips of silver blew around in

the desert air. Her cold grey eyes were contemplative, almost disappointed.

Harry grinned up at her realizing this woman could only be an illusion, "Ello Madam Sinistra!" He flopped an arm up to wave uselessly.

The arm fell back to the sand in a cloud of dust.

The woman's frown deepened, "How is it, Mr. Potter," She began slowly.

Harry's face turned confused. Her voice was far too clear to be an illusion.

"That no matter how much time I have spent with you I can never predict how you are going to react to my lessons?" She finished with a raised eyebrow.

Harry was silent. His chapped mouth hung open in dry exhaustion. His body was sprawled limply on the bottom of the valley between two large sand dunes. He'd fallen down one of them quite some time ago and hadn't had the energy to climb up.

"For example," Sinistra lectured, "I had expected you to solve this test three hours ago," Harry stared at her uncomprehending, "And instead I find you magically and physically exhausted at the bottom of a pair of sand dunes which you should have noticed by their runes that they were not entirely real."

"Wha--?" Harry asked.

His mind felt like mush but a small bit of clarity was sinking into his skin.

"Where do you think you are Mr. Potter?" That clarity was telling him that Madam Sinistra was not only real but she was severely

disappointed in him.

"Uh—," He articulated painfully.

Scars, when sunburned, were not very comfortable.

"The Sahara Desert?" He asked knowing the minute he uttered it that he was incorrect.

Madam Sinistra's eyebrows turned downward at a dangerous angle, "You haven't even left your hospital room Mr. Potter."

With startling clarity Harry suddenly recognized the runes that had been alluding him all day and the patterns of the magic that swirled around him. With a thought Harry changed those runes and the sand with its endless blue sky and burning sun vanished within the blink of an eye. Harry flopped to the cold tile of his hospital room, sand spilling onto the pristine white tile from every pore of his body.

The cold skin of the room touched him and Harry retched as the temperature of his body warred with the temperature of his room. A blanket wrapped around him protectively and Harry found his shaking self being lifted off of the floor by the strong arms of Bill Weasley.

"I told you, you should have gone to get him two hours ago," The red head glared at Sinistra.

"Unfortunately I trusted my pupil to figure out on his own that he was not actually in the Sahara desert." Sinistra sighed shoving a potion into Harry's shaking hands, "Drink this," she commanded.

Harry drank it and almost threw up again.

"Slowly," Sinistra sighed helping Harry lower the potion, (for it tasted too foul to be simple medicine), down.

After a minute of allowing his stomach to settle Harry tipped the potion back into his mouth more slowly this time.

"I didn't realize that he'd never seen the rune's for desert or sand and so could not compare them to anything," Sinistra stated a worried frown plastered across her face, "I thought we'd gone over those a while ago.

"We did," Harry croaked.

Madam Sinistra shoved the potion back up in a silent command to finish it.

Harry finished the potion, "I forgot. Panicked." He gasped.

The shivering was going down. Harry assumed that to be the work of the potion. So was the cold vs. hot feeling that had his body fighting convulsions.

"I thought you'd gotten out of the habit of panicking over the summer." Sinistra stated as she pulled out a short round jar with a strange white cream in it.

"An endless desert of sand is a little different from a wand pointing in you're direction Madam," Harry stated dully eyeing the jar suspiciously.

"Indeed," Sinistra frowned and twisted the lid open.

A pleasant enough smell wafted out of the jar. The smell pegged the cream to be made from a plant of some sort with the distinct taste of medicine wafting from it.

"A magical cousin of the Alo Vera plant," Sinistra answered Harry's careful scrutiny of the jar, "Not that the Alo Vera isn't magical on its own. The original plant originates in the Sonoran Desert of North

America and parts of Mexico and South America." She held the jar up with a small smile of pride as the two males looked at each other confused, "It's imported." She answered Harry and Bill's questioning gaze, "I order it specifically for sunburns. Truly a miracle worker, even Muggles use the plant for such."

Harry looked steadily at the balm, "One day you're going to have to tell me about all the places you traveled."

"One day maybe," Sinistra agreed, "But not today," She handed the balm to Harry, "Mr. Weasley will you kindly help young Mr. Potter smear this balm over every part of his body? Even his hair? I don't want one burn to be untouched do you understand me?" She had put on her most authority induced voice causing little room for argument, "I will leave the room momentarily while the two of you work."

She nodded to both young men and turned on her heel leaving the room with a billow of robes. Said young men looked at each other awkwardly. Harry raised an eyebrow while Bill shifted on his feet.

"Do you need?" He asked.

"No." Harry immediately stated.

"I'll just go get my Mum, to help with your—um—yeah." Bill responded reasonably.

"You do that," Harry nodded.

"Right." Bill left.

True to Bill's word Harry heard a knock on the door and a woman's voice asking if he was "decent" or not within the span of a half hour after Madam Sinistra's departure. Once Harry called the affirmative Molly Weasley waltzed in frowning at Harry's cream-caked appearance. She took some of the cream he offered and massaged

it into his scalp and applied some to the spot on his back he couldn't reach.

At least, Harry thought, the balm worked. The minute the substance touched his skin his burns cooled and loosened turning a light red rather than the dark stiff tan they'd become.

After Molly finished Madam Sinistra and Bill Weasley walked into the room. Bill sat next to his mother and Madam Sinistra stood by Harry's bed.

"Mr. Potter," Sinistra sat on the end of Harry's bed and looked him in the eye very carefully, "Do you understand what you just went through and why?"

"Not really Madam," Harry stated honestly, "One second I'm deep in meditation, the next I'm in the middle of the Sahara desert."

Sinistra frowned, "Have you forgotten that meditation is intended for more than organizing one's mind?"

Harry frowned back, "I'm not sure what you mean Sensei."

"I am talking about the oneness that meditation should bring you to. The 'oneness' of you and your surroundings." Madam Sinistra lectured, "Yes, you should be aware of your mind, you have to be able to discipline it and defend it so you need to intimately understand every corner, every aspect of your thoughts. But," Harry nodded expecting as much, "You must always be a part of the world in which you reside."

"Sorry," Bill interrupted, "Translation?"

"Never forget your surroundings." Madam Sinistra scolded, "You become incredibly vulnerable if you do not have awareness of the world around you. One could simply pick you up and move you to

another place if you are too deep in your mind to even feel it. Meditation is meant as a centering, a balance of you and the world around you. Your body serves as a channel for energy and it serves to connect you to the energy around you. If you cannot feel that energy when you are meditating then I have not taught you correctly."

"Energy..." Harry stated, "You've used that word before to describe magic."

"I have," Sinistra agreed, "And in part, it is magic. Remember what I told you about magic being in everything?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "It's all around us and a part of us. I don't really need proof to understand that." He pointed to his left eye and grinned a little.

"Indeed you don't," Madam Sinistra allowed a small smile before continuing her lecture; "Energy is the force that magic gives off; the force that connects everything to everything else. It's like the heat your skin naturally gives off. You should be able to feel it change just as you can feel a human body when someone comes into close proximity of your own. Wizards and Witches give off more energy because their bodies are so permeated with magic. They should feel heavier, a more prominent point in your awareness. I thought you all ready knew how to do this."

Harry looked at the bed sheepishly, "I did know how, I've just...grown out of practice focusing on other things and expecting danger."

"In the magical world one should always expect that there is a potential for danger." Madam Sinistra said, "While the nature of magic is neither 'dark' nor 'light' Human temperaments can cause magic to act in manners that one could consider evil."

Harry nodded to himself as he thought about the words Sinistra had said. It was true, he'd realized that the true nature of magic had no

pull in either good or evil. It did as it was designed to and merely flowed through reality at a relatively leisurely pace. The dust that Harry saw with his golden eye did move in patterns but it moved slowly like the air of a gentle breeze. It didn't move anything tangible, per say, but it never stopped moving. He'd been watching it ever since his left eye had been uncovered. It was dizzying and incredibly beautiful. He'd never once seen the brilliant light that Dumbledore displayed around him or the sickly, puke colored, black/green that was distributed from Voldemort's wand.

"It is the decision that makes the Wizard..." Harry heard himself mutter.

Madam Sinistra raised an eyebrow, "'It is our choices that make up who we are'." She agreed, "The same goes for magic. Magic is a tool that we have fashioned for our own uses. Weather those uses are kind or nasty is up to the Wizard or Witch handling it."

"I understand I think," Harry said, "I'll get back into the habit of paying attention to my surroundings."

Madam Sinistra nodded satisfied for the moment, "Then you won't mind if I test you unexpectedly?"

"I won't," Harry said dutifully.

Sinistra grinned slowly causing her young pupil to wonder whether or not he should mind.

"Remember you said that," Sinistra stated as she grinned.

Molly Weasley chuckled quietly to herself and Bill smirked while Harry sat feeling the weight of impending doom settle upon his shoulders.

Hermione stared silently down at the parchment in front of her. Scrawling letters spelling names lined the parchment. At the top of the Parchment were the words:

In

Memory of Brothers

Hogwarts will never forget

Half of her still didn't believe her idea had been met with approval. The other half scoffed that of course the other students would want an excuse to study behind Professor Umbridge's back. What student wouldn't?

Ironically, the name had been created by a third year Muggle born Hufflepuff. He had laughed after his idea had been passed.

"Great!" He had said, "We can call ourselves The Mob!"

His exclamation had entailed a great deal of explaining to those students that didn't understand what the Muggle Mob was.

The point of the name had been to honor the memory of Cedric Diggory and Harry Potter who in their "last moments" decided to band together as brothers of Hogwarts and defeat the Tri Wizard fourth task as equal representatives of the school. Of course the fact that Harry Potter was still alive and his whereabouts known was not open knowledge to the other students. Hermione allowed herself a small smile. Harry might think it funny that a group had been named in honor of his "death" when he was really alive. He had that sort of humor.

A dark humor, born out of trauma and torture.

Hermione frowned as her thoughts began to move away from the

uncomfortable images that popped into her mind. The image of Harry when she'd first found him. Deformed and in pain.

Hermione delicately placed the parchment in her hands on the library table in front of her. She noticed the parchment was a cream color and the signatures all a little sloppy with a few ink splotches here and there. Oh well, it was never meant to be a pretty piece of parchment after all.

"So," Ron slid into the chair opposite Hermione brining with him an air of cheer that adequately distracted Hermione from her thoughts, "When's the first meeting then?"

Hermione sighed, "I'm more worried about where we can have it."

Three large books were placed on the table next to Hermione and Ginny got into the chair next to her, "We also need to figure out a way to spread the word around to people in a way the Professors don't pick up on. Like the when and where info."

"Oi," Ron scowled, "Who asked you?"

Ginny pointed to her name on the parchment, the one directly beneath Hermione's and above Ron's.

"I assumed because Hermione is the undisputed 'boss' of The Mob and I have more brain capacity then you that I am entitled to my say in this." Ginny stated, "That and I know about Harry."

"More brain capacity?" Ron asked incredulously, "And what does knowing about Harry have to do with anything?"

His mouth had dropped open and the tips of his ears began to turn red in anger. Hermione held up a hand to stop the petty sibling arguments before they escalated.

"To your question Ginny, I all ready have an answer." Hermione grinned and pulled out a small golden coin flashing it in the light once before sliding it over to Ginny.

Ginny lifted it in front of her face and turned the coin one way then the other.

She raised a delicate red eyebrow and regarded Hermione, "A blank Galleon."

"Sort of," Hermione explained, "But not exactly. See," She said as she pulled another out of her pocket, "I sort of got the idea from those leprechauns at the World Cup last year. The coins aren't real gold. They used to be my collection of fake Doubloons from the pirate set my uncle gave me when I was six."

"You?" Ron asked grinning as he took the coin out of Hermione's hand, "Had a Pirate set?"

Hermione scowled and snatched the coin away from him, "Yes, I did. And I played with it," She answered before Ron's open mouth could ask, "I may be a book worm but I was still a kid. And Pirate stories made some of the very best games. Now shut it."

Ron raised his hands in surrender shaking his head as he tried to imagine it.

"Right," Hermione scowled, "As I was saying."

She placed the gold coin flat on the table top and tapped her wand to it a few times her moth drawn thin as she concentrated.

Ginny gasped and looked at her coin in surprise, "It's warm," she said as her eyes began to widen, "Wait! There's writing on it now! January third, fourth floor, room 35." She grinned broadly at Hermione, "Hermione, this is brilliant!"

"Maybe," Hermione wiped her wand across her coin and Ginny's coin became blank again, "but I need it to look like a normal galleon all the time. Not just this blank surface."

"What's the trouble?" Ginny asked.

"It's these charms I'm using," Hermione sighed as she pushed herself away from the table to lean back on the chair's hind legs, "They're not responding well to each other."

"Hmm..." Ginny squinted at her coin as though she could see the individual spells placed on it by doing so.

Hermione succumbed to gravity again and let go of the table. Her chair fell back to being a solid four leg object and Hermione laid her chin on crossed arms watching Ginny. A slow grin formed on Ginny's face and her brown eyes lit dangerously.

"I have an idea," She said excitedly, "I need all of the coins you're working on."

Hermione raised an eyebrow but bent to retrieve her book bag. She handed Ginny a clinking mass inside a draw-string canvas bag.

Ginny took it solemnly, "Don't worry," She smirked, "You'll get it back in a few days or so."

"A few days?" Hermione asked.

"Two or three at the most," Ginny nodded standing up, "And I promise," She said slinging her book bag over her shoulder, "Your problem will be fixed."

Hermione and Ron watched the youngest Weasley sweep out of the room in silence.

"I do not have less brain capacity then her," Ron muttered.

"I don't know Ron," Hermione stated as she watched Ginny check out of the library, "I didn't see you having any epiphanies."

Ron shot Hermione a glare as the corner of her lips twitched upwards. He looked away fighting a smile.

That next evening found Hermione Granger sitting in the middle of the couch in the Gryffindor common room. A large tome lay open on her lap with her legs crossed beneath it. Her bushy hair had been pulled back to her lower neck with a wide loose band. Unruly pieces of said hair dangled along her neck and in front of her face.

Absently, Hermione pushed a particularly long frizzy strand behind her left earlobe, her brown eyes riveted to the book in her lap. A loud sigh sounded in the arm chair to the right of the couch as Ron plopped himself into it. He slouched languidly, his long legs extending from the chair and his head leaning against the side.

"Well good news is, we have a practice room." Ron muttered exhaustedly, "bad news is I have another detention with the toad for 'wandering about the halls with no obvious intent'."

"She really has it in for you doesn't she?" Hermione asked without looking up from the book.

"I didn't even know 'wandering about the halls without intent' was cause for a bloody detention!" Ron complained.

"She doesn't like you Ron," Hermione sighed glancing at him and frowning, "You'd think you would try to at least avoid her."

"I do try to avoid her," Ron argued, "But the bloody woman is like a freaking Ninja. She always pops up out of bleeding nowhere!"

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, paused, and then shut her mouth with a shake of her head, "I didn't even know you knew what ninjas were."

"Just because I don't pay attention to some things in the Muggle world doesn't mean I'm daft." Ron stated, "I know about Ninjas the same way you know about pirates ok?"

Hermione stared at Ron carefully, "You had a Ninja set as a kid?" she asked.

"I had a pair of nun chucks ok?" Ron countered, "My brothers got them in the game shop in town all right? Can we please move back to Umbridge?"

"So what's better then?" Ginny Weasley sat down in front of the fireplace, "Pirates or Ninjas?"

"Ninjas," Said Ron.

"Pirates," Said Hermione.

Hermione and Ron stared blankly at each other for a full minute while Ginny laughed uproariously.

"Harry would say Ninjas!" Ron stated.

"Yeah right," Hermione rolled her eyes, "He would definitely say Pirates. Pirates are much more fun, Ninjas are so serious!"

"Yeah but Ninjas are cooler! They're Muggles and yet they can do things we do with spells!" Ron countered.

"Ah but Pirates live life on a ship getting drunk off their arses and doing whatever they damn well please!" George entered as he

jumped over the back of the couch to sit next to Hermione.

"Yes, while drinking is a fine past time Ninjas can enter and leave a place without detection. I think Harry would agree that this trait is the better one." Fred answered sitting down on Hermione's other side.

Ron looked at Hermione in sudden triumph and Hermione sighed defeated. Both of them were thinking about Harry's love of walking the corridors at night beneath his invisibility cloak.

"Anyways," Ginny smiled, "As stimulating as this conversation is Fred, George could you do the honors?"

Fred grinned at George and George waved his wand around the common room. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny felt pressure settling onto their heads and their ears popped. The three of them rubbed their ears and stared at George in question.

"Only a precaution," George explained, "We wouldn't want any eavesdroppers running to Professor Umbridge now would we?"

Fred grinned, "Ever since she's begun that inquisitorial squad it's hard for us to trust even the dear members of our own house."

"Now as to why we placed a bubble charm around us..." George grinned wider, "Our dear sister brought us a puzzle."

"One for which was quite easy to solve once we sat down and thought about it," Fred fished a hand into his robes and pulled out a small canvas sac that 'clinked' as it moved.

"But we couldn't quite get it to work properly," George said.

"So we hoped," Fred continued, "Being the genius you are, you could figure out what we did wrong." He handed the sack to Hermione.

"You're idea is brilliant," George smiled, "But you were right, the charms are a little finicky."

"Yeah," Hermione opened the bag and pulled out a small golden coin, "But I was thinking about it last night and I think I may have figured it out...Give me a minute."

She pulled out another coin and began waving her wand over the two coins in concentration. She looked up at the twins surprised and grinned.

"You two really are geniuses." She praised, "I see what you were aiming for but we both went about the aim the wrong way! It's so much simpler then we were making it! Why didn't I think of it before?" Her eyes lit up with excitement, "Thank you Fred and George!"

She gathered her book and the bag of coins standing and addressing Ron, "Why don't you tell them about the place you found?" Her voice was hitched with excitement, "I need to go finish these, then we should set a date for the first meeting!"

The four Weasleys nodded to Hermione as she left the bubble spell that George had put up heading quickly for her room.

"Well, Dobby, this house elf Harry freed once, told me about a place on the seventh floor..." Ron began.

The days that passed were stressful, not only for those students at Hogwarts but for Harry as well. Remus had talked to the Grangers and the Weasleys and they in turn spoke with Dumbledore and Madam Sinistra at length. The decision had been a difficult one involving all of Harry's doctors including the (detested by Harry) psychiatrist. Harry found himself sitting completely still upon his bed after his morning exercises. Though his body was still he could feel his muscles shake and hum in restlessness. He knew, somehow, that the adults were discussing whether or not he was ready to go back to

school.

Was he ready? The question had been running circles around his mind. His dreams had been getting not worse, per say...but more...progressive. The fact that a strange plain door was prevalent throughout them made the young man pause. His dreams were usually memories. Not good memories either. Mind, Harry didn't mind staring at a strange door over his normal nightmares...but it did give him a little reason to worry. He checked his defenses regularly enough to border on obsession...but the presence of Voldemort was the same as it had been. Absent, distant, yet there, hovering at the farthest reaches of awareness.

There had been a few times Harry had sworn he'd felt a surge of his presence, even if just for a moment. He frowned, a moment was all the bastard needed. That was why he constantly checked his mind's defenses. Doing so was the only thing keeping Harry sane.

He really needed to get out of the Hospital. Badly.

"Well," Ed Granger waltzed into the room with a large smile plastered across his face, "I've got good news."

Jane walked in after her husband with the same wide grin, "Really good news." She winked at Harry and sat down next to the bed.

"It seems you're professors and the medical staff agree that it's about time to begin preparing you for your departure from the hospital." Ed stated happily.

Harry stared blankly at the tall man, "Departure?" He asked.

"As in exit," Ed grinned.

"You mean...I get to leave?" Harry asked hope turning his cheeks upward slowly.

"Soon," Jane stated, "Dumbledore and Madam Sinistra want to prepare you mentally for your reintroduction into the Wizarding world."

"Reintroduction?" Harry asked, "What do I need to be reintroduced to?"

"No idea," Ed grinned happily, "The point is that you're going to be out of here soon. Doesn't that make you happy?"

Harry looked down at his lap not entirely sure what it made him feel. Shouldn't he be happy? Then why was his stomach tying itself up in knots? What was that bubble of fear creeping its way up his throat?

"I think it does," Harry stated.

Jane chuckled and placed a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder, "It's natural to feel nervous Harry. You've been in here for a long time. The last time you were part of the Wizarding world things didn't go too well... It's ok to feel nervous, but I think that's what Albus and Emily meant they want to prepare you for."

"Oh," Harry said.

His chest was tight with mixed emotions. Didn't he want to leave? Wasn't he itching to get out of this Gods forsaken room? Merlin knew he felt he was ready...yet with the admittance that he was to leave soon Harry felt a vast amount of hesitation. He wanted to leave...but he was afraid to go back to the world where Death Eaters existed and magic could be turned to sickly corruption...

But it was also the world of Hermione, and Ron; the world where Harry himself belonged. He knew it, deep within him that that world was where he was meant to be; where he was ready to be. It was the only place he could finish healing and gain some semblance of

closure.

Harry looked up at Jane and Ed Granger. His eyes seemed to glow beneath the artificial lights of the Hospital. A slow smile tugged his mouth upward as he regarded two of his four legal guardians.

"I'm ready," He stated, "I want to go home."

"Excellent," Ed Granger clapped his hands and rubbed them together excitedly, "Then we need to get ready as well!"

Jane and Harry looked at each other then looked at Ed, "We?" they asked.

"Well more Jane and I," Ed winked at Jane.

She raised an eyebrow in response, "Right..." She looked at Harry, "Please excuse us for a moment Harry. I need a word with my husband."

She stood and grabbed Ed Granger by the arm and exited the room.

Harry watched them go with a small smile but as the doors closed that smile moved downward. He looked at his hands worry and excitement warring within himself. Once he left this small room, the place that had become his haven, everything was going to change. He didn't know what to expect but he knew that a war was brewing and he was going to once again be in the middle of it. The question then was not if he was ready for the Wizarding world...

He stood up and shuffled to the window clutching his cane to his side in a white grip. His training would have to be escalated with Sinistra but even now he knew he had a wider range of movement in his legs then he had three weeks ago. But not yet enough. His magic...well he had enough grasp on it that he wouldn't blow up the school on accident. There was still a great deal there he needed to do as well

but Harry felt with just a little more time he could figure those things out.

Harry glanced at the Daily Prophet sitting on his bedside table and smiled grimly. Dumbledore was being portrayed as daft. Rumors were circulating that Harry Potter was indeed alive somewhere in the world. The Ministry was devoutly denying Harry's existence after they'd gone through all of the trouble of making sure he was considered dead. Then there was Voldemort and the many "missing" high standing citizens thanks in part to Harry's explosive summer...A dark, haunted, smile, of regret graced Harry's lips.

No, the question here then, was whether or not the Wizarding World was ready for the resurrection of Harry Potter.

Well, there it is. The 15th chapter of After the Second Rise. I know some might think the argument about Pirates and Ninjas is a bit dull but I can't recall a group of teenagers that didn't get into that argument when I was in school. I couldn't help but put it in and I thought it helped the scene move rather well as well as show off the relationship between the characters. I hope people liked it. This is the second to last chapter of this book; the next book is tentatively called After the Second Rise: Closure. That title is adept to change. Constructive criticism is welcome.

-Red

Treading Carefully

"We are here to learn." Hermione stated as she paced around the mottled mix of students, "In this place we are all equals in our pursuit of education. House rivalries need to be left at the door." Her eyebrows were slanted downward and a dark frown marred her face, "I can't believe a fight has broken out among us over something as petty as one's house!"

Her dark eyes bore over the guilty faces of her fellow classmates.

"Do you forget why we created this group?" She asked quietly glaring at Ron, "Did you forget Cedric and Harry? We are the MOB! We are brothers and sisters of Hogwarts School! In here we are not Pure Bloods and Mud Bloods. We are human beings with the right to defend ourselves! Witches and Wizards. Equally dangerous, equally vulnerable."

Her eyes glared at the older Slytherin boy who was standing with his back ram rod strait and his dark calculating eyes watching her without remorse. He and Ron had begun dueling each other; which was perfectly normal as dueling was one of the things all the students had been working on. Hermione was not entirely sure what had happened exactly, but what had at first been friendly dueling turned into rivalry and before anybody knew it wands were dropped and a fistfight had ensued.

Hermione wasn't even sure which one of the boys started it, but she knew Ron, and had a feeling he said something stupid to insult the Slytherin boy. Within the past three weeks she had gotten to know people, and particularly this boy. He was highly intelligent and very quiet. He did not rise to insult easily and held himself in an air of indifference that was tempered when he worked with the younger groups. Hermione wasn't sure why he was here. Or why he'd decided to join such a mixed group of students when Slytherins were notorious for keeping to their own house. He was especially gentle

with the young Slytherin boy who still clung desperately to his Ravenclaw sister's arm.

"It is foolish to believe that one such as I is in equal stature to any of you." The Slytherin stated almost bitterly.

Hermione raised an eyebrow carefully. That had been resentment in his voice. What on earth brought this on? She sighed and rubbed her temples carefully.

"For now could we just go over shield spells again?" She asked tired, "Ron will work with me and you Artemis can work with Luna for now. She seems to be having trouble with the spell."

The Slytherin nodded stiffly as Luna beamed brightly at him and the still room became bright with sounds and spells once again. Ron walked over to Hermione sullenly and she fell into the dueling stance silently.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" She asked as she flicked a small stunner at Ron who blocked it clumsily.

"What's there to tell?" Ron spat out, "The pompous arse was pushing my buttons is all."

He shot a stunner at Hermione. She quickly blocked it.

"On purpose?" She asked, "Or accidentally."

"You know that dirty—." Ron growled.

Hermione threw a heavy stunner at him, causing him to stumble.

"Just because he's Slytherin doesn't make him a Death Eater Ron!" Hermione hissed angrily, "I can't believe you would be so petty! He isn't Malfoy! He came here of his own free will not as a spy, not as an

enemy. He's one. Of. Us. And if you can't figure that out so help me I will pair you up with him every day until you get it!"

"You can't pair me up with him against my will!" Ron hissed back.

"I can and I will! Stop seeing shadows where there aren't any!" Hermione snapped back, "Do you think Julian and his sister are here because they were told to by some dark lord?" She asked pointing at the small Slytherin boy working with his Ravenclaw sister.

"No I--!" Ron began.

"Then what the hell is your problem?!" She hissed.

"Nothing I just--!" Ron snapped his mouth shut and glared, "You wouldn't understand ok?"

Both of Hermione's eyebrows skyrocketed at that in an instant. Her eyes narrowed as she regarded her 'best friend' in silence. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and stared levelly at Ron. He stood in a stubborn pose with fists clenched his jaw jutting forward as he glared at her.

"Ok," She said quietly, "Fine."

She turned and walked over to Ginny without saying another word to Ron. He watched her go, his chest still felt tight, restricted. His throat burned and his head felt hot. Yet as he watched Hermione walk away from him looking as she did he began to cool and realize something: out of every single person in this room Hermione was one who had the right to hold the grudge against the older Slytherin boy. Being Muggle born there was more reason for her to fear the Slytherin, more reason to hate him.

Ron was a pure-born wizard. The only Slytherin he'd ever had real contact with was Draco Malfoy. He had no real reason for hating

every single git that may or may not be in Slytherin. He looked around the room noticing how many students were working together in mixed houses. Luna, who'd been harassed by just about every house including her own was talking and laughing with the sixth year boy Ron had just been fighting.

Would Harry have the same qualms as Ron did? Especially after his summer? Or would Harry give the kid the benefit of the doubt?

Ron silently squared his jaw and looked at the back of his scarred hand, words criss-crossed across his skin covering the whole hand. Hermione was just about the only person in this room who could ever understand Ron besides Harry. What he'd said to her, to the Slytherin boy...he was being just as petty and cruel as the Toad.

He sighed and walked over to Luna and the Slytherin boy. The older kid stopped and his face which had seemed mildly amused seconds before hardened. Ron new that look well. He'd been seeing it on his own face more and more lately.

Luna stopped and looked back and forth between the two boys a large mysterious grin planted across her ever surprised face. She silently backed away without either two noticing.

Ron held up his wand then placed it on the floor at his feet.

"What foolish thing are you planning Weasley?" The Slytherin, Artemis, asked guardedly.

"I came to tell you I was wrong." Ron stated just as guardedly.

"Ron Weasley?" The Slytherin scoffed, "Admitting defeat?"

Ron grimaced and scowled, "Not defeat," He growled, "I have done things to make you dislike me," The Slytherin snorted and Ron plowed on with increasing tension, "But you really haven't done

anything to deserve it. So I was wrong."

Artemis watched him quietly waiting. Ron grimaced again.

The Slytherin boy stood stoically for a few moments, weighing Ron in a way that Ron could almost respect, "Apology accepted Weasley." He stated after some consideration.

"Right," Ron said, "Well."

"Ron," A second year girl came up to him, "Could you help me with the disarming spell?"

Ron looked at the girl then at Artemis. He sighed and then smiled.

"Sure," He said, "Let's see what you're doing wrong."

Hermione walked up to Artemis, who watched Ron with a strange look on his face.

"Look I wanted to—," Hermione began.

"No apology needed Miss Granger," Artemis sighed, "Weasley beat you to it."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise, "He did?"

"It may get passed you sometimes," Artemis said looking at her sidelong, "But he does know how to speak for himself."

Hermione looked away with a small blush on her cheeks, "Obviously."

Artemis rolled his eyes, "The same goes for the rest of us."

Her head whipped around to give him a retort but he'd all ready

turned to the three first years asking him for help. Her mouth shut and she grew a contemplative look. He'd been teaching the other kids not only defensive spells but also healing spells. She didn't think healing spells would have been good for the younger years seeing as how they weren't even generally taught until fifth or six year, but he'd been adamant in the belief that healing was an essential part of defense. Apparently he'd been doing minor healing spells since he could hold a wand.

The boy was a mystery. He'd even brought in a few other Slytherins to join the study group. It was amazing what all of them were learning from each other. The Slytherin's brought with them a brutal realism that actually helped the other's to focus. Sure, their culture was vastly different and they tended to keep to each other socially but they also seemed to be learning just as much from the other students as the students were learning from them.

Apparently there were even Slytherins that felt they would gain from a bit of extra study underneath Umbridge's nose. She looked at Ron, who was watching her guardedly and tried to smile. He gave her a hesitant smile back. They would have to talk later...If he would talk.

Ron had been drawing further and further into himself. It was as if he were trying to take on the burdens that Harry would normally be carrying if he were here. Yes, it was making him more self aware but he was changing. Hermione wasn't sure if it was changing or growing up but she just wasn't sure how to take it, or how to act. He'd been adamant in sticking up for the other kids and for what he believed in even when he continually got detentions with Umbridge.

Hermione suspected he was louder and more adamant so that the Toad wouldn't hurt the younger kids. She suspected he was doing it to protect them.

"Idiot," She sighed worried beyond all belief.

The boy was taking the abuse as if he deserved it, which sickened her, and scared her. She'd written to Harry about it but Harry had replied that Ron hadn't told him anything. She had hoped that Ron would confide in Harry of all people...

So she jumped to conclusions and in an effort to protect Ron she'd found she was talking for him. Ron didn't much appreciate her doing so either. It was this...being separated thing. The two of them just felt so empty without Harry to balance them out. Neither adolescent really knew how to deal with it.

So she sighed and watched Ron smiling when he looked at her waving him off to put off the conversation she'd been wanting desperately to have with him just a little while longer.

He stumbled into the common room. His massively bloody hand and forearms wrapped up in his robes and clutched to his chest. He made it three steps in before collapsing to his knees and stifling a strangled sob. He hated that woman, hated her with every single fiber of his being. She was sick, completely and utterly deranged. If there was ever anyone he wanted to maim it would be her. After what she'd done to him...why the hell was he receiving punishment for her sins? Merlin, he just couldn't take it anymore. Ron knew he was breaking.

He carefully began to unwrap his arm breathing jaggedly as he did so. The fabric peeled off of his wounds and he stifled a whimper. This was beyond anything...He'd written so much that the mere back of his hand could no longer sustain the spell of the pen. It had continued on to his fingers, then to his wrist, and up until it had reached the middle of his forearm and he'd been told to stop. His blood would stain that desk for centuries.

Why were people like her allowed to live?

"Oh Merlin!" The quiet gasp made Ron's head shoot up to stare at

the fire place where Hermione stood silhouetted against the flames.

"Shit," Ron gasped, "'Mione."

"Shit?" Hermione asked tension lacing her words, "That's all?"

Ron's eyes narrowed, "I don't need a lecture right now Hermione," He stood slowly his breath shuddering as he tried to restrain the sobs that threatened to break him.

"No I dare say you don't!" Hermione huffed anger pouring out of her every pore.

Ron could swear there was a light yellow sheen around her in the air but dismissed it as an illusion of his pain. She marched over to him and he shrunk back defensively. She froze and the anger melted away revealing a scared and worried face.

"You won't let me help you?" She asked carefully the hurt lowering her voice until he had to strain to hear it.

"I thought you were mad at me," Ron shivered.

"Mad at you?" Hermione asked, "Why would I be mad at you? I'm furious, yes, I want to march down to that—that—toad's office and break every limb in her fat body!"

Her gentle hands were carefully guiding him over to the couch in front of the fire as she spoke.

"Careful 'Mione," Ron chuckled weakly, "You'll ruin your good reputation speaking like that."

"Shut it," she commanded as she helped pull his arm out of the fold of his robes more fully.

"Oh Ron," She said as she got a full look at his arm, "Oh, oh Ron." She held his bleeding arm in her hands and tears began to well up in her eyes, tears that should have been his, "Why? Why can't you just let things go?"

"Let things go?" He snarled, "After what she's done? She's no better than a Death Eater! You tell me to just let her abuse her power? Let her walk all over us and the other professors? I can't Hermione! I won't!"

"Why?" Hermione asked, as she carefully bandaged his arm, "Why can't you? Don't you see what she's doing to you?" She asked angrily, "Any more blood loss and she could have killed you!"

"Good!" Ron spat, "Then maybe the press would get involved and people would notice the Ministry is just a big sodding piece of--!"

Ron's head shot back as her slap connected to his cheek.

"Don't you dare," Hermione growled her whole body shaking.

Ron stared at her with wide eyes and noticed how her face, which should be contorted in rage, was stark white. Her eyes were wide and her eyebrows stiff with worry.

"Don't ever say that again, do you hear me?" She asked, her voice was higher than normal, "I can't, I can't lose you. Not like I almost lost Harry, not for something so stupid!" She fell slowly to her knees clutching his robes and no longer looking at him with tears streaming down her face, "You've been getting further and further away Ron. You've been getting hurt and you won't tell me anything! And now this? How could you even joke about something like that? Please tell me I haven't lost you. Please."

Ron closed his eyes, had he noticed how much his pain was hurting her? He'd been keeping this burden to himself to protect her...but

could he continue after seeing how scared she was? The air he'd been holding back burst out of his lungs and a tear fell. No matter what he did, she was going to get hurt so was it really his secret to keep anymore?

"Hermione--," The sob raked out of his lungs and he clutched his good hand to his face, "I can't do this. I can't do this anymore."

Hermione slowly looked up at Ron, "What can't you do?" She asked quietly.

"I can't keep it—I can't keep silent anymore," He shook as he sobbed, "She's evil 'Mione, pure evil!"

"Of course she's evil that's why you need to stay out of her way!" Hermione said.

His eyes, when had his eyes looked so haunted? Hermione felt a dread forming in the pit of her stomach staring into her friends face. Those eyes, they looked so much like Harry's when she'd found him on her street.

"What did she do to you?" She asked quietly.

His lips trembled as he stared at her and he slid off of the couch carefully reaching out to her with a trembling hand.

"Did you read it?" He asked shakily, "Did you read what I wrote on my hand?"

Hermione reached for his bandaged arm and unwrapped a portion of his arm wiping the blood away in order to better read the scrawling letters. Her eyes widened then shot up to Ron's eyes in absolute shock.

"No," She said quietly, "She isn't, she's not that evil...?"

Ron didn't answer, he fell forward and grabbed on to Hermione no longer holding back his tears. Hermione grabbed onto him and held him up. Her eyes stared straight ahead and her face was ghost white. All that scrolled through her mind were some of the explicit words Ron himself had gouged into his own skin.

I shall not scream.

Harry paced back and forth in front of his bed. His jeans chaffed a little against his knees but the Doctors assured him that this would pass. His brilliant eyes were rooted to the ground in front of him and his hand clutched his chin. Hermione had sent him a letter, and she had sounded distinctly disturbed. What she was disturbed about she never said but Harry's fear for his friends safety had heightened considerably.

Something had happened to Ron. This Harry was sure of by his continued experiments with the wind. Ron was no longer the carefree youth he'd been when he'd left for school. Something had caused him to change drastically. His letters told Harry nothing except that Ron was lying to him and was trying to tell him something without saying what it was.

Harry stopped and glared darkly at the closed window. He was keeping it closed because whatever was happening to his friends had to be something they would tell him themselves. He wasn't going to use his newly found affinity to Voldemort by bursting into their heads and grabbing the information without asking. He wasn't Voldemort. He would not betray his friends' trust.

The hospital door opened and he whirled around remembering too late that his center of balance wasn't the most fantastic thing in the world. He stumbled clutching the cane and freezing as he stared with wide eyes at three red heads and two bushy haired Grangers.

The Grangers and Weasleys all grinned at him and began to laugh waltzing into the room with loud conversation and a welcome presence. A dog and a shaggy haired man entered after them followed by an old woman who never seemed to simply walk anywhere she went.

The door closed and all the adults were now in the room. A wand appeared and words of silence surrounded the walls and windows. Then the large black dog looking trimmer every time Harry saw him grew into the form of a haunted man with a mischievous face. Sirius black grinned at his Godson as Harry untangled himself and sat down on the edge of the bed looking at all the happy adults curiously.

"What's going on?" He asked the group at large.

Ed Granger clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder with a large grin, "We felt, because you were finally going to leave this god-forsaken hospital room, that we'd send you off with a last minute 'going away' party."

Harry's mouth dropped open as Bill and Arthur Weasley decorated the room with banners that proclaimed "congratulations" and streamers of red and gold to celebrate Harry's return to Hogwarts School. Bottles of Butterbeer were opened and a cake was summoned from Molly Weasley's oven into the room. A few nurses and healers trickled in along with Harry's physical therapist to tell him congratulations and to wish him luck.

Harry sat or stood and talked happily to the adults pushing his concern for the road ahead to the back of his mind. He loved this, being surrounded by people who loved him. Harry closed his eyes relishing in the feeling of their presence in the room. He opened his eyes to see a laughing Madam Sinistra talking to Jane Granger, a sight he rarely saw. It wasn't long before a game of exploding snap came out and Harry participated against Bill and Sirius which ended with Bill and Sirius grappling for the victory.

Harry laughed at the two until his sides hurt and watched the muggle doctors and nurses come and go wondering if they would be obliviated when he left.

"A private hospital is being opened in America," one nurse told him excitedly, "I'm transferring there after this. The doctors and healers have pooled their resources and are going to open it as a mixed internal and magical practice." She grinned at him, "We were informed of your laws and some of us simply can't stomach going back to not knowing about magic."

"But the Ministry would never allow a muggle and wizard practice would they?" Molly Weasley asked.

"That's why its being privately run outside of Ministry influence," A medi witch added, "That's also why it's going to be in America. That country has been looking for 'alternative medicine' and the laws there are more lax because the magical ministry doesn't hold nearly as much power. Each state has a different law concerning muggles and some states don't even recognize witches and wizards as being separate from muggles."

"Well," Molly said, "it's still a young country after all," she shrugged as if that explained Americans in general.

Harry just smiled.

"Good evening Mrs. Weasley," Madam Sinistra walked over as the nurse and medi witch said goodbye.

"Hello Professor," Molly smiled politely, "I hear there has been a bit of trouble at the school?"

Harry's head turned sharply to regard his professor; he was still worried about his friends.

"I'm afraid there has been a bit of trouble," Sinistra enlightened, "It's nothing to worry about yet, and I am not at complete liberty to talk about everything that's happening. You read the paper I hope?"

Molly nodded. Harry noticed she was a little stiff. Perhaps she had noticed there was something wrong with her son as well.

"I do," She agreed, "That High Inquisitor seems a little too enthusiastic about her job."

"Yes," Madam Sinistra said smiling stiffly, "She's making quite a mess of things up at the school. Her methods are...extreme. I can't say I agree with them, but then she is the representative of the Ministry." She bit out the word Ministry a little more harshly then she must have intended.

"Is that why Professor Dumbledore wasn't able to come tonight?" Molly asked.

Harry was shocked to see Sinistra soften and her eyes grow worried as she regarded Molly, "Something...has come to his attention." She said quietly.

Molly's hands balled into delicate fists on her lap. Madam Sinistra sat down next to the Weasley Matron and carefully placed a hand on her shoulder. Her grey eyes stared at Harry in an obvious attempt to get him to leave. Harry stood, his face completely empty of his emotions, and clutched his cane tightly as he walked across the room to sit with Sirius.

Sirius took one look at Harry and put down the Butterbeer he'd been drinking opening an arm in invitation to join him.

"What is it pup?" He asked.

"Would it be possible for me to leave tonight?" Harry asked.

Sirius shook his head, "I'm afraid not. Dumbledore wants to be the one to take you back for safety reasons."

"And he's busy," Harry said watching Sinistra talk to Molly Weasley softly at the other end of the room.

"I suppose he is," Sirius said slowly watching how his Godson's face remained completely impassive.

Molly's face turned white and her mouth opened up in what appeared to be shock. Her face was quickly regaining color but it was a color Harry recognized to be associated with rage. Madam Sinistra stood and beckoned Molly outside. The red head walked stiffly out of the room and with one look at Arthur had her husband follow her.

"Harry," Sirius waved a hand in front of Harry's face, "Oi, earth to Harry..."

Harry's eyes snapped over to Sirius, "Huh?" He asked intelligently.

"I asked why you wanted to leave tonight. Are you ok?" Sirius asked concerned.

"No," He began then shook his head, "I mean yeah," He sighed leaning back into the chair as Sirius draped an arm around his Godson's shoulders, and "I'm fine."

Something was going on at the school, something that caused Madam Sinistra to pull the Weasleys out to talk to them. Harry remembered Hermione's letter, then he remembered every letter Ron had sent that had been trying to tell him something but wouldn't.

Madam Sinistra walked in and began a conversation with a couple of nurses. Molly and Arthur Weasley came in much later with large, fake

smiles on their faces. Harry felt his heart drop into his stomach.

What had happened to Ron?

Ron stood silently in Professor McGonagall's office as the older woman examined his arm. She was equally as silent. Her eyes were hard and her lips were thin. A clear sign to any student that knew her that she was furious. Ron knew her well. Dumbledore stood with a tired expression that seconds ago was mad with rage. Ron couldn't look at the headmaster; he hadn't been able to breathe when moments ago Albus and Minerva were arguing. The room had felt as if the very air were being compressed.

Hermione stood behind Ron with her arms crossed against her chest. He could feel her behind him as if she were a heater at his back. It hurt to look at her, to see the rage that lived vibrating beneath her skin. Her lips had been puckered for the past week and her sharp gaze was focused on something no one else could see.

Ron sighed, he was so tired. All he wanted was to curl up in his bed and forget. Forget that this year had happened at all. Forget why he hadn't told anyone and forget that...woman.

"Why didn't you come to one of us earlier Mr. Weasley?" Minerva asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Because," Ron said quietly, "I told you, she wants me, only me." He shivered a little, "And if she has me, then she doesn't hurt anyone else."

"Gryffindor may be known for its bravery Mr. Weasley but this is just bullheaded stupidity." Minerva snapped.

Ron glared at her defiantly until her concern for him made him look away. Why had Hermione told their head of house? This was his battle damn it. This was him protecting everyone else.

"Don't you dare," Hermione growled behind him as if she knew his thoughts.

She probably did, Ron reasoned ruefully. Hermione had always understood him better than his own parents did. Normally that was a comfort, right now though it was downright bloody annoying.

"I didn't need anyone's help," He muttered.

Hermione made a very disbelieving noise behind him and he clenched his teeth.

"I don't," He growled, "I know the power she has over everyone, even you professor," He said addressing Dumbledore, "I know what she can do to this school if we let her, and I know there's nothing anybody can do about it. My father works for her boss, I'm not an idiot."

"There's nothing we can do?" Minerva McGonagall allowed her eyebrows to shoot up into her hairline, "I think, Mr. Weasley, that you are underestimating our resolve to protect our students. And as you are currently a student at this school that resolve extends to you."

"You're a fool if you think I was just going to stand by and let this happen," Hermione growled behind Ron.

Ron grimaced, "But she's the bleeding ministry!" He growled, "You can't go against her!"

Minerva gave Albus a long hard stare and the corners of Dumbledore's lips twitched upwards slightly.

"Your concern for our well being is touching," professor McGonagall said, "But did you really think I got to my age by being cautious? Now what we are going to do Ronald Weasley is this: you are first going to contact your parents."

"What?" Ron asked horrified, "I can't!"

"You can, and you will. End of discussion." Minerva snapped sternly, "We will see what it is in our power to do about Professor Umbridge. In the mean time you will not go to any detention she hands out to you at all understood?"

"But she's a teacher; I have to go to her detentions." Ron said.

"You may be a student and she a teacher, but Ron..." Minerva sighed her voice becoming softer as she looked at Ron carefully, "You are also a human being, and every human being has a say in what they do or don't do. No one can make you do anything against your will."

Ron shuddered and breathed carefully, "Yes," He said closing his eyes as his face contorted in pain, "They can." He opened his eyes showing how broken and vulnerable he'd really become.

Minerva's eyes widened a little and she glanced at Professor Dumbledore and Hermione, "Albus," She said quietly, "Would you please escort Miss Granger back to the common room?"

"I'm not leaving him," Hermione growled protectively.

Ron sighed, "Hermione, it's ok. It's just McGonagall right?"

"I don't want to leave you," She said quietly.

Ron turned and smiled tiredly at her, "It's ok, I won't be long."

Hermione hesitated, and then nodded. Her chin was set stubbornly against her teeth and fists were clenched but she turned and walked out not waiting for the Headmaster.

"Please take a seat Mr. Weasley." Minerva smiled gently, "Do you

want to lock the door?"

Ron shook his head.

Minerva nodded and sighed. This was going to be a very difficult conversation. She pulled out a piece of paper and a quill.

"Now I want you to tell me everything that you are comfortable in telling me," She said quietly, "Everything you can, understand?"

Ron nodded, took a deep breath, and then began: "You said no one can force you against your will right?" He asked quietly, "Well you're wrong. With the right spell anyone could make you do anything..."

Minerva forced herself to listen to every single word. She never allowed herself to show the disgust she was feeling inside or the rage that was building slowly within her. All she wanted to do was fly down the stairs and blast apart the woman responsible for hurting her pupil. But she was patient. She listened and even gently patted his arm when he began to break and sob. No child, boy or girl should ever go through what he had to. She admired his sense of justice but was sickened by how that sense had been twisted to meet the means of deranged, ugly, woman.

She'd seen similar cases too many times in her lifetime, more among young girls than young boys but making a child torture themselves? Ronald Weasley would never be the same again. Minerva McGonagall promised after three hours of getting the full story out of Ron that Dolores Umbridge would pay. She wasn't sure how yet, but she would make it her primary goal in life to make Dolores Umbridge's life a living hell.

Hermione paced in front of the door to the Gryffindor common room wringing her hands together in worry. Other students had been called to Professor McGonagall's office a while ago, meaning Ron was

done telling his story...so where was he?

The door opened and Hermione jumped to see Professor Dumbledore escorting Ron into the common room.

"Well," Dumbledore smiled, "You certainly called it. She seems to have been waiting for you this whole time."

Ron shuffled his feet and smiled weakly at Hermione, "Hey 'Mione."

He looked so weak, as if any small wind might blow him over and knock him out. She smiled carefully at him.

"Hey Ron," She said, "Do you..." She fidgeted, "Do you want to sit down?"

"I'd rather lie down actually," He said quietly.

Hermione smiled more genuinely, "Ok," She moved over to the couch and sat down on the end.

Ron plopped himself onto the couch and without thinking lay down with his head resting in her lap. Dumbledore sat down in one of the arm chairs next to the couch and stretched his legs out to the fire with a loud sigh.

"Oh to have time to sit with my pupils and relax a moment," He sighed dreamily, "To engage in intelligent conversation with them and challenge their perspectives. How I miss those days."

"Sir?" Hermione asked wondering if she should be amused by his antics or confused.

"I have found that in all my years of working at this school that some things really do get by my attention." He continued, "It is never a small thing either. It's always something that I should have seen and

could hurt many. No," he sighed, "It is never a small thing."

The other students in the common room gave their professor weird and curious looks.

"I sometimes wonder," Dumbledore stated, "If I had just spent more time with my pupils if I could have seen better what was happening. But to do so would raise suspicion and I am but a prisoner in my own home." He was staring into the fire the usual twinkle in his eye completely extinguished, "Perhaps I am getting too old." He smiled sadly at Hermione and Ron who were both watching him in silence. "I wanted to tell you at least one happy thing. Madam Sinistra's young apprentice is coming home."

Ron and Hermione stiffened realizing just what it was Professor Dumbledore meant by that. Hermione clutched Ron to her and Ron's hand tightened against her robes. Both of their eyes held barely contained hope as Dumbledore smiled at them and stood greeting the other students as he exited the common room.

"D-did he mean?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Hermione allowed a small tear to fall down her cheek, "I think he did."

Harry was coming home.

Yeah, so I said I was gonna spilt this story into two books...Well I lied. So I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and if it was too vague don't jump to conclusions all will be explained concerning Ronald Weasley. See you in the next chapter! Keep the constructive criticism coming! Thank you.

-Red

Walking In

Harry stood facing the sun set. His unruly hair had been cut at the insistence of Mrs. Weasley but it was still long enough to fall over his face and partially hide Harry's golden eye. Harry made sure to push his hair to that side of the face because he didn't want to alarm every witch or wizard he came into contact with. Of course, he grinned wryly, it didn't hide the rest of his face...or his neck. Ah, well.

"Wotcher Harry," Tonks beamed as she bounced into the room, "Ready?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "I am." His eyes didn't stray from the sunset.

A small smile played gently upon his lips. Anything good on? He remembered Hermione saying. His heart leapt a little. Soon, very soon he'd be with his friends.

"Excellent!" Tonks grinned shrinking Harry's trunk, "Shall we?"

Harry turned and looked at the enthusiastic witch with a grin.

He walked over to Tonks taking the proffered arm she extended towards him, "Why thank you madam," He grinned as Tonks laughed.

"All right then!" She marched across the floor with Harry in tow and opened the door.

Harry stepped out and turned to regard the room he'd been living in for the past four months a small smile on his face as he silently and mentally said goodbye. The walk through the Hospital was a surreal one for Harry Potter. He bade goodbye to the many nurses and Doctors he had gotten familiar with over the past months and smiled confidently to the patients that watched the strangely scared boy.

Tonks chattered on about inconsequential things beside him. Some of them warnings about what may or may not happen when the Wizarding world realized their "boy-who-lived" was indeed alive. But she needn't have done so. Madam Sinistra and Remus had all ready taken Harry through the possible scenarios of what they expected might happen.

So Harry walked out the doors of the hospital carefully, his senses extended to the max just in case. His stride while limping was long and he held his head high determined not to look back at the place that had healed him. Tonks and Harry walked calmly across the parking lot to an old, run down looking Chevy truck where Tonks motioned for Harry to get inside. He did so dubiously and carefully climbed in. What he found when he got in were four more seats then there should have been possible with two other wizards. One was a large bald African man who introduced himself as being Kingsley Shacklebolt, the other Sturgis Podmore.

Harry greeted the two men politely and they helped him the rest of the way into the truck.

"We are to take you through a more docile part of the Forbidden forest," Informed Kingsley who sat behind the wheel, "We will meet with Dumbledore at the edge of the Hogwarts grounds where you will be escorted into the school by the headmaster himself. You will arrive in time for dinner."

"Uh," Harry glanced at Tonks who was grinning widely, "Thanks."

"Shacklebolt's a high ranking officer in the Auror corps." Tonks explained schooling her features to be completely serious, "He's one of our best officers."

"I believe you." Harry stated while staring at the intimidating man.

Except for a jump that pushed Harry so far into his seat he felt he

may have indented it the ride through the forest was entirely uneventful. When they reached the meeting point just a few paces out of reach for the Whomping Willow Harry felt strangely detached. He got out of the car with a slight stumble having to grab hold of his cane so as not to fall over into the mud. When he righted himself he stood and simply stared at the luminous castle he'd missed so dearly.

Its image had changed drastically to Harry. He had to squint his eyes to truly look at it. The magic that danced through the air sent swirling clouds of misty glitter rolling upon the air. The castle itself was like a living, breathing structure of glowing dust so bright its radiance overpowered almost everything. Harry felt his breath hitch in his throat as he looked upon the magnificent display. His little castle within his training world was absolutely nothing compared to this structure.

"I'd forgotten," He said quietly, "Just how beautiful it is." More like, he'd never truly known its true beauty.

"I feel as though I've forgotten every time I lay eyes on it," Kingsley Shacklebolt agreed beside him handing Harry his shrunken trunk.

Harry looked at the large intimidating man in surprise.

Kingsley winked at him, "Good luck Potter." He turned and got back into the car.

"Watch out for yourself," Tonks said hugging him, "I'll let Remus know you got here safely."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "Isn't that just a bit out of your way?" He asked grinning a little.

She mockingly punched his shoulder, "Not the way I see it," She grinned.

Harry laughed. Tonks smiled and pointed to the wizened old man coming Harry's way. Harry watched Dumbledore approach noticing the slight stoop to his shoulders that hadn't been there summers past. When Dumbledore got closer Harry recognized the infuriating twinkle in his eyes that was Dumbledore's trade mark and relaxed. Something was troubling the old man but he wasn't letting it control him. Harry was a bit relieved.

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore smiled placing a wizened hand on his shoulder, "It is good to see you out of the Hospital."

"It's good to be out sir," Harry grinned.

Dumbledore chuckled, "I dare say it must be."

The two looked each other over making sure the other was well and smiled, "Now," Dumbledore wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders and began walking, "we have some guests in the castle so I hope you don't mind if the secret of you're existence were spread a little earlier then we'd planned."

Harry smirked, "Not at all, Headmaster," the truck roared to life behind them and turned leaving not even a disturbed blade of grass in its wake, "I wouldn't have left the hospital otherwise."

"I hope you don't mind Harry," Dumbledore smiled, "But I'll have to ask you to wait out here for a while alone before coming in."

"I don't mind," Harry said.

"My absence will have been noticed by my guests and I don't wish to alarm them further." The Headmaster continued, "I would like you to collect yourself before going in."

Harry nodded slowly and grinned, "Of course Albus."

He was currently wearing the dragon hide cloak Charlie had given him for his birthday. Harry flicked the hood up over his head and crossed his arms as Dumbledore summoned a house elf and handed the elf Harry's trunk. Harry watched the creature un-shrink it and pop out of existence with it.

"See you in the great hall?" Harry asked the headmaster.

Dumbledore smiled with his twinkling eyes and all knowing smile then walked down the hall, to go by another entrance no doubt, and vanished behind the corner.

Harry looked down at his sneaker clad feet and stuck a hand into his jean pocket thinking about what he was going to do, or even if he would say anything when he entered that room. How would his fellow students react to Harry? Would they recognize him? And what about Hermione and Ron? Would he finally be united with them only to not know them as he had before? He'd decided before leaving the hospital that he wouldn't really care what the reactions of the other students were. He'd decided that he'd just be his charming self and hope for the best.

Harry closed his eyes and breathed deeply counting in his mind and controlling his emotions. He needed to be calm. He'd always done well under pressure. It was a trait for which Harry was particularly proud of. It made tests a hell of a lot easier. He was currently undergoing a great deal of internal pressure, but he knew that no matter what existed behind those large double doors...Harry could handle it. He'd handled and survived the summer. He was currently handling two legs that stubbornly refused to reach their maximum potential and heal completely. He'd handled losing all control of his magic and the nightmares that plagued him...Yeah, he could handle this.

Harry squared his shoulders and breathed in deeply once. The candles on the sconces above and around him stuttered and then

died as he pulled courage from the flames. He looked up from underneath the brim of his hood and with a small clack pushed his cane forward. He was ready.

The Ministry officials had all questioned Ron and under pressure from the minister found they were forced to ignore his claims against Dolores Umbridge. They sat now at the head table silently uncomfortable. It was so obvious the Weasley child had been severely abused by the Madam Undersecretary but it was a child's words against the right hand of the Minister. To say that she had abused and tortured him would be to say that Fudge himself had been holding the wand controlling the boy.

A compromise of sorts had been made. Dolores Umbridge was not allowed, under any circumstance to hold detentions. Any detentions she did pass out would be taken over and carried out by the other respective staff members at the school. It was not justice, but it was a reprieve of sorts. Ronald Weasley was also allowed to forgo any defense lessons held by Professor Umbridge. Meaning he was completely exempt from class. A failing, perhaps as the boy had a few major tests to take in the spring and without the class the ministry wasn't sure who would teach him.

Ron sat next to Hermione his eyes glaring holes into the top of the table with a hatred that threatened to choke him rising in the pit of his stomach. The Minister himself had come to question him and decided he'd been lying. The pompous little bastard sat chatting happily with a very stiff Professor McGonagall at the head table. Ron wanted to scream at all the ignorant bastards around him but couldn't even get the courage to look up.

Hermione sat beside him trying in vain to get him to eat. She was just as furious as Ron, if not more so and Ron's brothers and sister sat next to him in a tight line daring any to approach. The Gryffindor MOB members sat in close proximity as well, not because they knew what had happened but because they sensed something had

happened to one of their comrades.

Dumbledore had all ready stood and spoken to the school welcoming their guests and asking that the students be on their best behavior during the Minister's visit. The food had just gotten half eaten when Ron stood stiffly no longer able to stomach professor Umbridge's smug glances. Hermione stood silently as well and Ron's siblings were about to when the double doors to the great hall creaked and shook... Conversation abruptly paused as heads turned to look at the door. It didn't move so everyone turned again to their friends and meal. Then the door creaked a second time uttering a loud moan as it did so. Necks craned as students tried to get a better look at the doors. As the door continued to shake conversation dulled and eventually stilled. All that was heard was the rattling of the wood and metal.

Muttering began as some of the older students stood along with staff members and Ministry employees. Ron, standing nearer to the door then some could have sworn he heard a voice behind the door cursing just before fire peaked at the edges of the door frame. Wands jumped to people's hands, both student and adult alike. Those nearest the door backed away from it. Ron and Hermione didn't move. That fire looked disturbingly familiar to them.

The doors creaked and gave a great moan before the doors slammed open sending a torrent of air and dust up into the vast room. Some of the younger students screamed, causing the older students to jump out of their chairs brandishing their wands in defensive stances. Hermione and Ron were the first to fall into defensive stances. They watched the door and noticed that eerily the hallway outside was completely exempt of any light when normally candles burned endlessly on the walls.

The sound of a rhythmic clacking sound was heard as a short, lean figure began to solidify out of the darkness. The figure was dressed from head to toe in a black dragon hide cloak that fit his form in a

trimming way giving his body chiseled lines. He walked slightly hunched over, limping a little as he leaned heavily onto the cane that was responsible for each echoing clack. His eyes sat in shadow beneath the rim of his hood and all anyone could see was a slightly crooked nose and a ravaged cheek with a dreadful looking scar that pulled the left side of his lips upward in an ever-present smirk.

He seemed to be born out of smoke. The dark grey vapors wrapped themselves around him and then parted for him. Hermione noticed that on his feet were a pair of bright red sneakers and her eyes lit up in sudden recognition. It was the cane that did it for Ron, the ivory and obsidian masterpiece was clutched by fingers covered in thin scars making it impossible to tell where the original flesh had begun.

"State you're business!" One of the minister's guards yelled his voice ringing out against the vaulted ceiling of the hall.

His wand was pointed directly at the strange young man. Dumbledore stood holding out a hand to the guard. He lowered his wand beneath Dumbledore's powerful presence.

"Please," The Headmaster said calmly with eyes twinkling madly, "Tell us who you are."

The left side of the young 'strangers' mouth slowly moved further upward as he smiled. The look of his lips and the way the scar on his left cheek pulled at his skin made the smile ironic as though he were highly amused by some joke or secret only he knew. Hermione and Ron held their breath. They knew, but they were both afraid to confirm the obvious.

He reached up and flicked the hood back revealing a mess of unruly black hair hiding half his face and a brilliant green eye staring directly at the Headmaster. His expression was almost cocky and extremely amused.

"I'm Harry Potter," He grinned.

Pandemonium ensued as he uttered those words. Hermione and then Ron launched themselves across the five or six steps that separated them from their best friend. When he wrapped his arms around them the world and all the chaos erupting in the room fell away and for one single moment the three of them were absolutely complete. The fears and hardships they'd endured up to that point felt almost meaningless in the face of being together again. They held tight to each other Hermione, and even Ron allowing rivulets of salt water to roll down their cheeks. Harry didn't cry. He couldn't, it just felt so good to be with them again that he couldn't even bring himself to breathe. It was like...coming home again.

"Hold on!" Cornelius Fudge yelled.

His voice was like a distant stream somewhere far off in the background slowly getting louder.

"Order!" he yelled magnifying his voice with a wand.

Harry, Hermione and Ron's heads snapped up to regard the Minister of Magic darkly. How dare he interrupt their moment of reunion!

"Want me to hex him?" Hermione asked angrily, "I'll gladly do it."

The venom in her voice pulled Harry down to the present and he looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Not now," Harry drawled, "Maybe when we have less Aurors and more space between us and the other students."

Hermione's mouth twitched upward. Oddly enough Ron hadn't said a word. Harry filed that away for later as the room quieted and children sat down roughly in their seats.

"Now," The minister stood breathing heavily his face livid, "How dare you use the name of our Savior falsely you imposter!."

Harry caulked a head and look at his two friends amused, "I'm a savior now am I?"

"Harry," Hermione reminded him, "you always have been."

"Ah, right," He grinned, "I forgot. What rubbish." He rolled his eyes and even got Ron to grin a little.

Harry detached himself from the other two feeling a loss the minute he did. He paused debating whether or not he should cart them along with him to yell at the Minister but decided he didn't need to as they both immediately fell to either side of him supportively. He smiled a little.

"Merlin I've missed you two." Harry muttered.

"Not as much as we did you," Ron said quietly.

Again, there was something very off with Ron. His aura felt different, darker then it had before. Harry resolved he'd have to take a closer look at it after he'd cleared up the Minister.

"I'm sorry," Harry called, "Minister Fudge? You're mistaken. I am who I say no matter how much I or anyone else wishes otherwise."

"You lie!" A short plump woman stood up and Harry was so amazed at the high pitched little voice coming from the large toad-ish creature that he leaned back and regarded her worriedly, "Harry Potter looked nothing like you!"

Harry squinted at her not really being able to see her clearly. He frowned and pushed his bangs away from his face revealing his glowing golden eye. A gasp rose from all those who could clearly see

his face. Fred and George Weasley made the most obnoxious gasp of all the other students over playing the part of never having seen him.

"Good Merlin, look at his eye!" Fred crowed in a high pitched voice that was overly dramatized.

"His eye?" his twin squealed, "Look at his face!"

Harry's mouth twitched. He so wanted to react but couldn't, at least not until the wands pointed at him were lowered. Harry shook his head ever so slightly and focused on the squat plump woman. Great Merlin, she was tainted so severely with sickly dark magic that it choked the image coming from Harry's normal eye. Harry looked at Dumbledore alarmed a little but refusing to show it on his face. The Headmaster wasn't reacting to the tainted woman's presence; in fact he seemed to be giving her his polite, but strained, attention.

"Well madam," Harry said taking his cue from Dumbledore in treating her with a polite distance, "I wonder how you would look after half a year running from or being tortured by Voldemort and his followers."

Another gasp ran through the crowd and Harry felt as though he were playing a part in a shocking play. Would they boo him off stage next? Would tomatoes begin to fly? Were they all reading the same bloody script?

Harry watched fudge incredulously as shouts and questions rang through the hall. Those nearest Harry jumped out of their seats and quickly moved away from him. Fudge had gone white and he was wringing his hands together casting Dumbledore furtive worried glances.

It was the large woman that jumped out of her seat that set things into motion, "Hem, hem!" she stated sweetly, "Are you quite well child? Perhaps you are confused. Voldemort is dead!"

Harry looked at the woman as if she were severely ill, "No actually, Voldemort is unfortunately quite alive...and I'm not ill," he said slowly as he looked to his companions confused, "Do I really look that bad?"

"Have you looked in a mirror recently?" Ron snickered.

"Tha-that's right!" Fudge yelled throwing a fist into the air, "You can't possibly be Harry Potter! The ministry has all ready confirmed he is dead! So of course you would be lying about Voldemort to."

Harry raised an eyebrow again and regarded the ministry officials incredulously. Were they all mad? Hermione and Ron began to raise their wands and move in closer to Harry protectively.

"No," Harry said loudly and slowly as though the two he spoke to were dumb of wit, "Sorry, but it's not a lie. How else could I have gotten this?" He asked and pointed at his face.

"You had a very unfortunate mother mate," George snickered behind Harry.

Harry shot him a glare and George pointed innocently at Fred. Harry grinned wryly at them and Ginny kicked the nearest twin to her with a solid Shushing noise.

"We're not sure," And Harry was alarmed to recognize the careful voice coming from the frightening woman addressing him as though she were speaking to a poor injured puppy, "Certainly we should find out right away, for whoever did that to you was a terrible monster."

Ron stiffened beside Harry and Harry didn't need air movement to feel the dark hatred emanating from his friend. Slowly Harry gazed at the woman calculating in his mind. Was she the reason for Ron's taint?

"Ron," Harry said quietly, "Who is this woman?"

"She's not a woman," Ron spat.

"She's a monster," Hermione growled.

"I gathered that much," Harry said wryly, "But who is this monster?" He asked.

Hermione stayed silent allowing Ron to speak, "Umbridge," he snarled.

"Hmm," Harry said thinking about how he could prove who he was then rolled his eyes, "Of course," he breathed.

Hermione and Ron looked at him confused, "What?" Hermione asked.

"They can't pretend I don't have this." He lifted his hair away from his face exposing the entirety of his scars and one small scar in particular that stood out as a red lightning bolt against his skin.

The children nearest him gasped and whispers rose again, "It is Harry Potter" they said, "He has the scar..."

Harry rolled his eyes a little, "Among others," He muttered.

"What?" The minister stood on his toes peering at Harry nervously, "The scar?" He reminded Harry of an eager child whose mother wouldn't show him something.

"Yeah, I have the scar," Harry said holding his fringe up so all could see.

Umbridge waddled down the steps from the head table over to Harry. Both Ron and Hermione stood closer to Harry raising their wands at

the woman threateningly.

"Now, now Miss. Granger, Mr. Weasley," She squeaked, "I only wanted to see the scar..."

She regarded Harry's other scar, the one that ran from his forehead through his left cheek with a hunger and excitement that disturbed Harry. She smiled widely at him, and Harry recognized a predators hunger in the expression. His eyes grew cold and he watched her unwaveringly. He didn't notice the air around him stir, nor did he notice that his eyes, normally full of life and gleam were so still they spoke of death. Umbridge took a step away from him involuntarily.

"I am Harry Potter Madam," Harry said to her quietly.

"No..." Dolores Umbridge shuddered, "A child of the light would never have such eyes..."

Harry smiled at her grimly and turned toward the head table ignoring the sadistic woman in front of him.

"Headmaster!" Harry called tired of repeating himself, "If I state under veritasserum that I am indeed Harry Potter will this ridiculous conversation be resolved?"

Dumbledore looked at Cornelius his hands steeped in front of him in question, "Well Cornelius?" He asked, "It seems the boy has given us a rather reasonable request. Shall I ask Severus to fetch the potion?"

"But-but there's paperwork to fill out, written consent to sign for Veritasserum to be used..." Fudge stumbled.

"Surely that can be done later," Albus consoled, "This is an excellent opportunity to find out where the boy came from and how he got his wounds. Think if you could catch the person responsible..."

Cornelius nodded his eyebrows drawn down in deep thought, "Yes," he said, "Yes this is an excellent opportunity indeed."

"Severus would you please?" Dumbledore asked, "A low dose should do."

Snape looked scathingly at Harry and then at the Headmaster, "Of course Headmaster."

Harry refused to even look at Snape.

"Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked, "If you would like to accompany us to my office?"

Harry nodded agreeably to the headmaster and turned. Hermione and Ron turned to go with him and he paused looking at the Headmaster for askance.

"I'm not sure young Miss Granger and young Mr. Weasley should come." Dumbledore said, "If you are not Harry Potter I worry about their feelings."

"Then they should come," Harry said looking directly at Minister Fudge, "For I am very certain of who I am."

Hermione and Ron nodded next to Harry and the three of them followed the Headmaster and the rest of the ministry officials out of the Great hall leaving behind them a wake of questions and chaos.

Harry was happy to see that the Headmaster's office was exactly the same as it had been one year ago. He staggered a little to think that all that had happened to him had been within the course of a year only. It felt like he'd spent a lifetime away only to come back to a world that hadn't changed at all. Harry had changed, he'd grown. But the wizarding world hadn't.

He walked over to Fawkes the Phoenix and the creature trilled happily at Harry upon seeing him. Harry smiled and gently stroking the bird's neck. Fawkes watched Harry with one brilliant golden eye as though weighing Harry. Fawkes pushed his beak against Harry's cheek almost seeming in question. Harry didn't know how or even if he should answer. He just smiled at the bird and continued to massage its silky feathers.

"I'm telling you Dumbledore this is a complete outrage!" Fudge's voice rang through the office as he climbed in through the door, "We need a modicum of Veritasserum at least not this tiny amount brought by your professor."

"I assure you minister this amount should be perfectly capable of finding out the information you require." Dumbledore said placating, "Is the scribe with us?"

Ron's aura seemed to darken as Percy Weasley swept in with a clipboard and a quill. Harry gave Ron a questioning glance but Ron shook his head. Yet another thing to explain later. Hermione stepped up next to Harry and pet Fawkes as well. The bird crooned at the two of them happy to be receiving so much attention. Ron stood beside Hermione leaning on Dumbledore's desk. He never once took his eyes off of Umbridge.

"Hem, hem," The Umbridge woman interrupted, "You seem quite certain the child is who he professes to be. Don't you think you're being a bit too hasty? Letting him into your office seems to be quite a risk. The ministry would hope you would be more cautious with strangers in your own school."

"Allowing this child into my office is no more a risk then allowing you into my office Madam," Dumbledore said.

Harry looked over at Ron and Hermione who were trying to hide a small but grim smile.

Hermione leaned in, "That woman uses the power of the ministry to hide and push things to go her way. Don't worry though; I think Dumbledore has had enough of her trying to manipulate him." She explained.

Harry nodded to her and glanced again at Ron this time using his golden eye to make a full assessment of what was wrong. His mouth almost dropped open in shock. Ron's aura was no longer the soft, warm, maroon it had always been. It was hot, almost a bright angry red with black strains tinting the edges. Harry stiffened.

"Ron," He said before he remembered all the people in the room, "What happened?"

Ron stiffened, and so did just about everybody else in the room. They were staring at Harry confused.

"I don't believe now's the time to ask Mr. Weasley that Mr. Potter," Dumbledore stated.

"Now wait a minute Dumbledore," The minister said, "I want to know why the boy thinks there is something wrong with Ronald Weasley."

Harry looked at the minister stoically, "Anyone who knows him can tell that something's happened to him Minister."

Percy wasn't looking at his younger brother. Harry could feel shame running off of the older Weasley. When the hell did he become such a prat? Harry wondered.

"Headmaster," Severus Snape stood in the doorway with a small vial in his hand.

Harry jumped and clutched his cane. He clenched his jaw fighting the instinct to run. He hadn't felt the man's presence at all! Merlin, there

was a Death Eater not two feet from him and Harry hadn't noticed his approach. His knuckles were turning white with his effort not to show the primal fear that was driving through him.

Hermione placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and even Ron looked at Harry alarmed. His hands were smoking. Damn it he had thought he'd gained control over this. Everyone was looking at Harry a little worriedly. Snape watched him and Harry could feel his impassive eyes on him, calculating.

"Thank you Severus," Dumbledores soothing voice was like a calming draught to Harry, "Would you mind moving over here next to me?"

Harry's alarm heightened. Dumbledore wanted Snape in the room while he was vulnerable and under Veritasserum? Was the old man mad?

"Harry calm down," Hermione whispered, "He's not going to hurt you, not here."

Harry shook closing his eyes. A candle on Dumbledores desk sparked to life and Harry breathed deeply. His control was tentative on the candle. It was burning at a rate too quickly for the wax to disintegrate.

"Ouch!" Harry turned his head to gaze at Fawkes who had the skin of Harry's elbow in his beak.

The bird crooned and the candle slowly went out. Harry smiled at the bird and the phoenix let go. He held out his arm and the small creature majestically stepped onto his arm. The Minister and his employees watched as Harry stroked the feathers of the phoenix and calmed down considerably. Ron snickered and their dumbfounded expressions broke.

"Now see here boy," the minister began, "Phoenix tears null the effect of Veritasserum. We can't have you holding that bird while we administer the serum."

"Of course not," Harry said agreeably, "but until I have the Veritasserum in my system I will keep the bird close for your own safety."

"My own what?" the Minister sputtered.

"My magic is a bit wild minister," Harry stared levelly into the minister's eyes, "I thought I had control of it, but seeing a 'former' Death Eater has triggered the more...explosive nature of it. I'm sure you've heard of post traumatic stress syndrome?"

The minister nodded a little more jerkily than he had surely intended. The effect was like that of a bobble head with too much grease build up. Hermione and Ron looked at each other and had to hide smirks.

"Can we please get on with this?" Harry asked Dumbledore, "I'm famished, and I need a bed as soon as is bloody possible."

Ron snickered a little at the bored tone Harry was displaying. Snape sneered a little behind Dumbledore.

"Is this really necessary?" He drawled, "I can assure you that only Potter would have such a disregard for authority."

"I'm afraid the minister sees it thus," Dumbledore smiled, "Now Mr. Potter," He summoned a large plushy chair, "If you would please sit down? Then we can administer the serum and begin the questioning."

Harry nodded and beckoned to the chair. It scooted over further away from Snape and the ministry officials gasped and began muttering to each other.

Hermione elbowed Harry and muttered, "Would you quit showing off?"

Harry was about to say something but saw her stern look and he was immediately abashed, "Sorry," he muttered back, "Couldn't resist."

He was rewarded with a smirk from Ron. Harry resisted the urge to beam at his distraught friend and sat down. He held up his arm and the phoenix leapt off of his arm to land on a very startled Ron Weasley. The bird began to hum and Harry allowed the soothing magic of the song to soak into him. He calmly took the Veritasserum and held it up in a cheeky "cheers" to the Minister before downing the silver liquid.

His mouth immediately opened in a grimace. The Serum held an immediate numbing effect that Harry detested. He began swallowing trying to push feeling back into his throat as the liquid continued to numb everything within him as it continued down. When the serum met Harry's magical core he gasped doubling over in pain as the fire violently rejected the foreign magic. Hermione and Ron were at his sides immediately and Fawkes trilled in what seemed to be laughter as he soared back to his perch.

For a few seconds Harry was worried he was going to lose complete control of his fire and char his friends. He didn't though. With one final burp of smoke Harry felt immediately better. Of course that meant he wasn't numb anymore and it also meant that the fire in his core had burned the Veritasserum right out of his system.

Harry had to think quickly. He was dazed as his friends and the Headmaster bent over him worriedly.

"Shit," He said gasping, "I'm sorry Headmaster."

"Whatever for child?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

"It won't work," He said shaking a little, "My core doesn't react well to the potion. It burned it out of my system."

The Headmaster nodded concerned, "Then perhaps we should just hear your story Mr. Potter."

"Burned it out of his system?" The Minister asked incredulously, "That's preposterous."

Harry laughed, "I wish it were," He said, "There are a few very specific healing potions and even muggle medicines that for some reason my core simply won't allow into my system. You should have seen what happened when they tried to give me new bones in my legs. The hospital had to order a new bed."

"How," The minister asked, "Is such a thing possible?"

"My wand," Harry said, "Held the core of a phoenix feather." He stared unwaveringly into the Ministers eyes so that the minister would realize he was telling nothing but the truth, "I was stabbed with my own wand Minister. There was a farm where I was stabbed. An innocent muggle farm. The effects of being stabbed with a wand as volatile as my own were extreme."

The Minister's face went very white as Harry spoke and he remembered the blast site where he himself had declared Harry potter dead.

"You're telling the truth," the minister mumbled, shocked, "You are...Harry Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes, "It's so nice to be recognized Minister."

"But sir, how can this boy be--?" Dolores Umbridge began but was interrupted as Fudge held up a shaky hand.

"Not now Dolores," He said, "We need to get back to the Ministry. There are things—things that I need to investigate." He looked at Dumbledore and Harry noticed with concern that the headmaster stiffened and his expression became polite, closed, "There are things, Dumbledore, which the ministry will want to discuss with you on this matter later."

"Of course Cornelius," Dumbledore stated agreeably.

Fudge, his guards, Percy Weasley, and even Umbridge exited the Headmaster's office with confusion and surprise. Harry watched them go knowing that this was not the end of the matter. Harry highly doubted the argument was won. He sighed and grinned at his two friends.

"Just to be sure," He said, "I know what you two did second year in the girls' bathroom."

Hermione hit his shoulder, "We know you're Harry you little prat."

"And for the record," Ron said as he leaned against the chair, "You did it too. So don't make it sound like we were up to something alone."

Harry smiled widely at Ron, "No but I bet you liked how that sounded."

Ron hit Harry up the back of his head.

"Is that all Headmaster?" Snape drawled.

Harry stiffened, that was the second time he'd forgotten, the second time a death Eater could have surprised him. Why couldn't he sense Snape's presence?

Dumbledore nodded to Snape, "Thank you Severus."

Snape left the room without as much as a glance at the miraculous re-appearance to Harry Potter.

It's edited. Thanks for the reviews. Keep them coming.

Picking up the Pages

Harry lay staring up at the ceiling. His arms were crossed behind his head and his hair was pushed out of his face across the pillow. The bed was so soft...uncomfortably so. The scene in the common room had been a strange one. At first everyone stayed away from him, watching him warily as if he were some dangerous animal: unpredictable, strange...Then as if a switch had been flipped Harry found many of his classmates just wanting to touch him, to ask him questions. It was the most bizarre evening he'd ever had.

If it weren't for Ron and Hermione he would have been incredibly overwhelmed. They had stood by him, giving him not only support but protection from the overzealous questioners.

Yes, he'd used wandless magic, yes Voldemort was alive, yes his scars were the result of that, and what was with the fire? ...Harry Potter had wished while answering one question after another that he hadn't chosen to come out of hiding so abruptly. He also wished he'd been able to push open the bloody doors instead of having to resort to such drama. He hadn't realized he'd entered the feast quite as dramatically as everyone said he had... He'd just wanted to open the damn doors. Kind of hard to do when you depended on having one hand on a cane for balance and the other trying to push a pair of double doors five times your size.

Harry rolled over onto his side with a great exhalation of breath. It was so quiet. And at the same time so loud...and way to bleeding bright as well.

Harry hadn't been able to completely open his right eye since he'd gotten back. The magic that permeated everything was just so...So amazingly beautiful, and painful. Harry knew he'd get used to it. Magic was in the very air here, in the walls, the ceiling, and floors...It permeated every single thing so thickly Harry was amazed that the stone was just stone and the wood banisters really were just wood. It

was hard to pick out the individual magic's of the people around him.

This was most likely the reason why he hadn't been able to sense Snape while in the Headmaster's office. That was a very disconcerting thought. He'd have to really hone his skills if he didn't want to be surprised.

Harry closed his right eye, dimming the effect of the magic but not depleting it. It was so strong here that even with his right eye closed he could still see. Now that was going to be cumbersome when he wanted to sleep. Harry sighed and lowered his hands from their crossed position behind his head. He had to shake them out a little because the limbs had fallen asleep. He lay for another few minutes just staring at the ceiling with thoughts and memories of all that had happened that evening swirling through his thoughts before he gave up.

Harry sat up lazily. He was tired, obviously, but he knew he wouldn't get much sleep that night.

He glanced to the right where Ron's bed was. The room was completely silent...which was weird because if Harry remembered correctly Ron was the one who snored. Maybe...Ron was having trouble sleeping as well?

Silently, as though making a noise would cause a siren go off Harry slipped his legs over the edge of the bed. Sitting up he leaned forward glancing around the room at the other sleeping occupants suspiciously and cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Pst," Harry whispered, "Ron! You awake?"

Bandaged fingers grasped the edge of the curtain and pushed it aside revealing Ron's blank face.

"Yeah." Ron said, "Why're you awake?"

Harry grinned and shrugged, "Nerves I think. You?"

"What've you got to be nervous for?" Ron asked.

Harry raised an eyebrow, "Quite a bit actually..." he held up a hand and began ticking off his fingers as he spoke, "This whole coming back thing what with Timmy knowing my exact whereabouts, then the ministry wanting me dead again because I contradict them. All of the concerned students vying for my attention and wanting to know a story I can barely tell you without freaking out..." Then he looked up at Ron with one more finger in the air his expression innocent, "Then there's the fact that my best friend is filled with such an extreme hatred it taints his aura..."

The bandage on Ron's arm covered his fingertips to just below his elbows. Ron consciously tucked the arm to his side. There were the scars...scars that were only just visible pushing out from his tan skin that Harry was concerned about. He knew what would cause those scars. He hadn't noticed earlier because he'd had his golden eye open and Ron's darker aura must have hidden them.

The thing was the scars were so miniscule that unless one was searching for them they normally wouldn't be noticed. The scars were not as numerous as Harry's, not nearly so, but they riddled Ron's skin all across his torso and over his shoulders and Harry suspected they were on his back neck and face too but it was so hard to see them in this dim light that he wasn't sure.

"Harry?" Ron asked raising an eyebrow, "I know you and I are close and all but you're really starting to freak me out with the close scrutiny."

Harry hadn't realized that he'd moved to sit on the edge of Ron's bed in order to get a closer look but he had. He was leaning in scrutinizing Ron's chest and the small barely visible lacerations that

didn't extend further than a couple inches long.

"Most people don't know Crucio will leave scars after experiencing it over a long period of time," Harry said leaning back and staring levelly at his friend.

Ron looked away from Harry.

"They don't know because normally victims of the curse go through it all in one large bout..." Harry continued, "And they usually go mad before any scars can set in."

His voice was quiet and kind, but his eyes bore into Ron with cold calculation.

Ron chuckled weakly under that gaze, "Scars Harry? How could the Crucio curse leave scars?"

"What's under those bandages Ron?" Harry asked quietly finally looking away from Ron to stare at the bead sheets.

"You didn't answer my question," Ron muttered stubbornly.

Harry sighed, "It's my theory," He said quietly, "Crucio is technically a mental curse. It uses the mind to attack the body. But it's so powerful that the mind ends up over compensating and it needs proof of what happened in order to believe it happened." Harry's eyes were blank as he spoke, haunted, his voice was even and didn't display any emotion, "So scars begin to develop internally, on your bones, through muscles and sinews until it's happened so often that they begin to push out of the skin to be visible on the surface. This is why Crucio hurts so much, because it is literally tearing you apart from the inside out."

"Harry, you wouldn't—." Ron began.

"I have some of those scars Ron," Harry said quietly, "You can't see most of them because they're buried beneath other more brutal scars but I know that curse. I know the signs. It's ok if you don't want to tell me what happened yet. I get it, but don't lie to me." He was looking at Ron worriedly, "Please don't lie to me."

Ron nodded slowly his face was tense with keeping his emotions in check.

"I won't lie to you Harry," Ron stated straitening his back, "And I won't make up any excuses for what I did, or what I allowed to happen to me. I don't regret my decision to protect others."

Harry looked a little surprised at first but then he smiled grimly, "All right," He nodded, "Fair enough."

He looked around the room and held out a hand to his cane. It leapt to his fingers. He carefully stood and looked at Ron.

"Grab some pillows and blankets," Harry said

"Why?" Ron asked suspiciously.

Harry shook his head, "Trust me ok?" He hobbled over and grabbed a pillow hooking his blanket with a finger he dragged it off the bed as he walked toward the door.

Ron frowned and lifted the end of Harry's blanket tugging on it and making the other boy stop. Harry stumbled and turned with an annoyed frown. Ron supposed the boy had forgotten how to clue others in to his plans. Ron raised an eyebrow at Harry and shook his head exasperated. He tossed the end of the blanket over Harry's shoulders.

"You don't want to let that drag so it can get caught on something do you?" he asked patiently.

Harry's lips made a little "O" before smiling sheepishly, "Of course I do," Harry grinned, "I enjoy falling down stairs. It's my favorite pastime."

"oh, so we're going down the stairs are we?" Ron rolled his eyes, "You were a klutz before you were a gimp idiot," he reminded Harry, "Be careful."

"There is so much I could say to that," Harry grinned.

"Please don't," Ron sighed rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Harry chuckled and walked out of the boys' room. The common room downstairs was warm with the glowing coals from the fireplace giving it comforting soft light and long dark shadows. Ron followed Harry into the common room and to the couches that sat around the fireplace. There sitting on the ground in front of the fireplace sat a bushy haired young woman with a red headed young woman writing on a piece of parchment and eating from a bag of cookies. So intent were they on the parchment in front of them they didn't notice the surprised boys standing watch above them.

Harry leaned over Hermione to look at the parchment curiously, "What's that?" He asked.

Hermione and Ginny jumped and looked up startled, "Oh it's you," Ginny relaxed.

"Don't do that!" Hermione gently hit Harry's thigh frowning, "You scared me! Why are you awake?"

"I could ask the same of you," He nodded to both girls, "You didn't answer my question."

"It's a list," Ginny said, "We were trying to figure out what spells need

to be worked on more for the MOB."

"The MOB?" Harry asked puzzled sitting down on a couch.

"Yeah," Hermione answered, "It's the study group I wrote to you about. The defense one?"

"Right," Harry nodded recalling Hermione's explanation, "Why the MOB again?"

"Well actually," Ginny grinned, "It was named after you and Cedric Diggory. Cuz you two were Hogwarts champions."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "I'm honored," He grinned, "That my name would be used after my 'death' for a secret group practicing self defense."

Ron hit Harry's shoulder cheekily, "We didn't break the rules for you."

Harry rolled his eyes, "but you did name it for me."

"Cheeky brat," Ron muttered hitting Harry gently across the upside of his head.

Harry grinned, "As to why we are up," He stated, "I couldn't sleep. The beds are far too comfortable here and the rooms are cold. I thought taking a nip on the couch might help." He jerked his head at Ron, "And I dragged him with me."

Ginny raised an eyebrow, "Ron agreed to cuddle with you?" She asked grinning a bit.

Ron's expression became horrified while Harry laughed, "No Ginny," He smiled, "He didn't agree to anything." He raised his eyebrows suggestively grinning at her.

Ron punched Harry's shoulder harder than he had intended while the girls laughed. Harry mock-pouted at Ron and clutched his shoulder.

"I was joking!" Harry pouted.

"Haha," Ron growled, "I want to laugh mate, but find there's this spot in my throat and it won't let sound out."

"And yet it allows enough sound to speak?" Harry asked.

Ron raised a fist again, looked at Harry's grinning face and sighed deciding to let it go.

"What?" Harry asked smiling widely, "No retaliation?"

"There's no relief in hitting an idiot." Ron sighed.

Hermione and Ginny burst out laughing and Harry stood with a very impressed look on his face.

"Well done mate," He grinned and worked on sitting down.

He had to grab onto the couch to sit all the way but eventually he made it to the floor next to Hermione. Hermione Ron and Ginny watched him silently making an effort not to make a sound or any expression that wasn't normal. Harry smiled at them proudly for a minute and the three of them smiled slowly. They'd almost forgotten the struggle in his limbs.

Harry stuffed his pillow behind him and slowly pushed his legs out straight in front of him with a happy sigh. He placed his hands flat on his thighs and Ginny giggled, his grin was such that he looked in that moment like a kid that had done something extraordinary.

"So what's on the list?" Harry asked, "Can I see it?"

Hermione nodded and handed the sheet to Harry. Ron slowly sat down next to his sister as Harry looked over the spells they were thinking about introducing to the MOB. Harry's expression became contemplative as he read them.

He looked up at Hermione. She was startled by how bright his golden eye looked reflecting the fire. If she hadn't had a few months with him before school started to get used to it she'd think his multi-colored gaze unnerving. She recalled the dark looking figure that had walked carefully into the dining hall earlier that night. He'd grown, changed. He was still Harry but there was something there that hadn't been before she had left in August.

Involuntarily she reached out a hand and touched his shoulder. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow and she blushed a little.

"Sorry," She said, "Just trying to make sure you're real."

Harry blinked a few times confused before a wide grin spread across his face, "Really?" He asked teasingly, "I thought I was a cheeky brat?"

Hermione immediately frowned and gently pushed him, "You are a cheeky brat. Give me my list back." She snatched the paper out of his hands.

Harry looked at Ron and both boys snickered a little as Ginny rolled her eyes, "Very mature," She drawled.

Hermione joined the good hearted chuckling. The laughter slowly died down and Harry's smiled quietly.

"Thanks 'Mione," he said, "I think I understand. And...I want to know, what's been going on while I was holed up in the hospital."

The three Gryffindors looked at each other silently wondering where

exactly to begin. Then all of them started at once telling Harry about the hats warning at the opening feast, then they went into tirades about Dolores Umbridge and what was going on at the ministry and in the Order of the Phoenix. Harry listened, his face growing darker as they went on. By the end of their tale he was staring silently at the embers in the fire place. The flickering light threw his scars into stark relief against his skin. He didn't look like a fifteen year old in that moment, his lopsided grin simply wasn't present.

"Why would the ministry feel it needs eyes in Hogwarts?" He asked silently.

"We're not entirely sure," Ginny said, "We think it's because Dumbledore and Fudge aren't on good terms."

"Why should that matter?" Harry asked.

"Because Dumbledore is a very influential man," Hermione answered, "Whoever gets the political power Dumbledore holds gets a great deal of influence over the wizarding community."

"But that's just mad," Harry said shaking his head, "He's all ready the minister of magic. He all ready holds more sway over the Wizarding community than he should."

"He's power hungry," Ron stated, "And scared because of the threat of Timmy existing on the horizon."

"I thought he didn't believe me when I told him that Voldemort was alive..." Harry stated.

"I think he did," Hermione bowed her head and fingered the rug beneath them, "He was so bent on not believing Dumbledore that when you came and confirmed Dumbledore's suspicions it threw him into a bit of a panic."

"A man in power who is also in fear of something is a dangerous man." Ginny said.

"While you are in these walls I'm not sure Fudge can do much, and I think he knows it," Hermione said seriously, "I'm worried about what he's going to do next."

"Well we can't predict the future," Ginny said leaning back against the couch, "So I wouldn't worry too much until he decides to act."

The trio looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"What?" She asked, "It's not like you can do anything until he does act so isn't it best to take it easy until then?"

"I'd rather be prepared," Harry said feeling as though the conversation was moving away from Fudge and into a much more dangerous man's territory.

"You'd rather be stressed," Ginny corrected him, "Being prepared and being stupid about worrying are two entirely different things."

Hermione and Ron looked at each other with raised eyebrows. They had noticed long ago how Harry obsessed over the small things that he couldn't change. Apparently Ginny had noticed as well.

"In the hospital," Harry said looking at Ginny with level eyes, "I had to learn patience. It nearly drove me crazy when Sirius told me about things that were happening out here when I was stuck in there."

"And what did you learn from that?" Ginny asked serenely.

"That there was nothing I could do except wait until I was better." Harry stated, "Well, I'm finally well enough. I'm back, and I just want to get my life moving again. I'm tired of waiting."

Ginny shrugged at Harry, "Then learn what you need to learn and take it easy. You don't need to rush into everything now that you're back. You're here now; you don't need to worry so much, what will come, will come. Be content in the thought that you'll be there when it does."

Harry, Hermione and Ron stared at Ginny in surprise. She spoke wisdom beyond her age and sat before them with the look of a satisfied cat. Harry looked at Hermione, Ginny never ceased to surprise him. Ginny stretched languidly and yawned.

"Ron," She beckoned to her brother, "Hand me your pillow will you?"

"Why?" Ron asked hugging the pillow tighter.

"Because this floor is uncomfortable and we still have a lot to discuss," Ginny beckoned again and Ron tossed the pillow at her.

"Thanks," Ginny grinned laying the pillow in front of her and plopping her elbows onto it, "So what's next?" She asked.

"Well I suppose we need to introduce Harry into the MOB," Hermione said carefully.

"I don't know," Harry said seriously, "I can't use a wand remember?"

"But that's what brilliant Harry," Ron grinned, "You could teach us a little bit of basic wandless magic."

"What's more," Hermione smiled, "You have more experience than any of us at dueling, and you could critique us and give us pointers."

"Even without a wand?" Harry asked skeptically, "I never dueled with a proper stance because I never had time and all summer my duels were without a wand. It was mostly me surviving and not caring how I did so."

"But that's the type of stuff the MOB needs to understand," Hermione said, "We have made loads of progress in our spell work but we are still doing everything mechanically. There's no creativity and no spontaneity. No one realizes that in a real fight the other fighter might not play by the rules."

Harry carefully shifted his body down so that he was lying on his back with his head propped up by his pillow. He placed an arm behind his head as he thought. Did he really want to teach people about the way he'd been treated over the summer? About how to survive such a situation? Could he teach that? He'd spent most of the summer using accidental magic which he now knew had been wandless; it had been desperate, frightening every step of the way. He'd become paranoid to the point that he knew where every student in Gryffindor tower was, every possible exit. He'd memorized his friends' auras even if they were difficult to feel and see them in this magical place. He'd killed to survive. Could he teach that?

Harry sighed slowly, "I don't know if I could help you," He said quietly his eyes stared at the ceiling haunted, "I don't know how to convey what a life or death situation feels like. I don't know if I want to talk about it either."

"We're not asking you to tell us anything you don't want to Harry," Hermione said quietly, "We just want you to help us if you can. We want to include you in this amazing thing we've created." Her eyes were gentle and a little excited being brighter than normal.

Harry could see how much it would mean to Hermione, and as he glanced at Ron and Ginny he could see how much it would mean to them too. He sighed and looked once again at the stone ceiling.

"All right," Harry said quietly, "I'll come, but I'm not promising anything and I get to decide when I come ok?"

The three around him looked at each other and grinned then all of them launched into tales about the other members of the MOB excitedly. Harry listened bemused at his friends' enthusiasm. They spoke at length about Luna Lovegood and the few Slytherins that were part of the MOB. They talked about a young Denis Creevy and Neville Longbottom's extravagant progress. The rest of the night was tales about the meetings and all the embarrassing and funny things that had gone on there. They talked until they fell asleep on the floor of the common room arms and legs entangled and four sharing two pillows and blankets.

Morning came too soon for the exhausted teenagers. Harry's eyes blinked open to stare at the disapproving face of their head of house Professor McGonagall. She stood above them the morning dawn casting dramatic shadows over her stern face.

"I know you and you're friends have been separated for a long while Mr. Potter," She began.

The other three to either side of Harry began to stir.

"But that does not excuse the fact that two boys are sleeping under the same blanket as two girls." Minerva frowned.

Harry grinned tiredly, "But one of those boys and girls are related." He pointed out.

Minerva's lips thinned, an obvious sign she was not amused, "Because of certain circumstances I am going to allow this only one time. But if you four break the rules again I will be forced to give you detentions. As it is, you have my class first thing after breakfast. I expect three of you to show up promptly understood?"

"Yes professor." Harry nodded.

Professor McGonagall nodded, "I think it best you wake you're

friends up Mr. Potter," She smiled a little, "I doubt you want to be subject to any interesting rumors regarding you and Miss Granger."

"Huh?" Harry asked wondering what she meant by that until he looked to his left and found the reason he couldn't feel his arm.

Hermione lay on Harry's left and on his right? Harry glanced over to see Ginny's sleeping face on his other shoulder with Ron behind his sister. Harry raised an eyebrow wondering how the four of them had positioned themselves like that when they had fallen asleep initially in a circle.

"Right," Harry said carefully wriggling out of the middle of the two girls, "I suppose there are going to be enough rumors about me circling. I'd rather not add to it."

He sat up and Ginny stretched looking around groggily. Her arm hit her brother who snorted and rolled over beginning his own stretch to wake up. Harry smirked when he watched the siblings waking up routine. He placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder and shook it. She mumbled incoherently and rolled over away from him. Harry rolled his eyes, and then grinned.

He lifted a hand and looked around the room. Good Merlin, McGonagall woke them at dawn? Well, he'd get them up in time to go back to bed at least. He wiggled his fingers stirring up the air a little. The ends of Hermione's bushy hair lifted tickling her cheeks. Harry felt Ginny sit up beside him blinking groggily at him.

"What?" She asked.

Harry held a finger up to his lips and grinned then turned back to concentrating on Hermione's hair. Ginny leaned forward waking up more fully as her curiosity was piqued. He moved the air around Hermione carefully. The ends of her hair tickled her cheeks again and a hand shot up to rub the itch away. Hermione's nose scrunched

up and she made a small noise that wasn't unlike a cat as the itch didn't go away. Harry let the air still and her hand dropped.

Ginny, now fully awake had to stifle a giggle as she looked at Harry. Harry's grin widened. Ron sat up next to Ginny stretching his arms out with a huge yawn.

"Wha's 'e doing?" he asked crawling over curious.

"Harry's messing with the air somehow," Ginny whispered with mirth, "Watch."

Harry's grin faded as he concentrated again. It was easier to manipulate the air here then it had been at the hospital but it still took some concentration. Soon Hermione's hair was tickling her face again. He nose once again scrunched up in a pout and her other hand joined the first to rub the itch away. She rolled over onto her back trying to run from the itching torment and made that little noise again making Ginny burst out in giggles. Harry's mouth twitched and he tormented her a little more. She made a sound that was almost a small growl and rolled over to the other side curling up into a ball.

Ron couldn't hold in his amusement anymore. He burst out in laughter startling Harry into laughter and making him lose his concentration. The three laughed as Hermione opened her eyes and gazed at them incomprehensibly. It's didn't take her long to realize that they had been messing with her. Her mouth dropped open and closed a few times as she got up on her elbow gazing at her three laughing friends.

"Wha--?" She asked.

Harry laughed and swished his hand through the air stirring the ends of her hair again.

"You--?!" Hermione asked pushing herself up higher to a sitting

position.

The three laughed harder and Hermione's nearly angry face broke into a grin on its own. She pushed Harry back and he laughed louder bracing himself with an arm.

"You brats!" She laughed, "All of you!"

"Ah, but you still love us," Harry grinned.

"You!" She poked him hard, "Have become an imp! What did you do in that hospital?"

"Twiddled my thumbs and ate my pie," Harry smiled angelically.

"Right," Hermione deadpanned rolling her eyes and sharing a look with Ginny, "Little boy blue huh?"

Ginny giggled. A loud rumbling sounded beside her and the four laughing teenagers silenced and looked at Ron who in turn looked at his stomach. He looked up at them and shrugged.

"I suppose we're all awake now," Harry smirked.

"Yeah," Ginny cocked her head to the side narrowing her eyes, "Why is that?"

"McGonagall," Harry stated, "Apparently sleeping in the common room together is a breach of the rules."

"It's the same rule that makes it impossible for boys to go into the girls' dormitory." Hermione stated, "It's the same rule it's been for the past thousand years."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "It's also a rule that assumes that all teenagers go psycho sexual on each other when they are forced in

the same room together."

"Yes," Hermione said rolling her eyes, "I suppose it is."

She stretched and sighed, "Sleeping on the floor wasn't such a great idea."

Harry looked at Ron who was not hiding the fact that he was staring at Hermione as she stretched and grinned, "Oh I don't know," Harry said, "Some people seem to enjoy it."

"Who would enjoy a stiff back?" Hermione wanted to know.

Ron looked up at Harry and then quickly looked away with a small blush.

Harry grimaced, "I wish I only had a sore back." He said rolling his arms and shoulders.

He was a little afraid of moving his legs; or trying to get up for that matter.

Ginny looked at Harry with sympathy, "Are you going to need help getting up?" She asked.

"No," Harry said wincing, he began to massage his leg muscles, "If you could just hand me my cane..."

Ginny was all ready holding it out for him. He raised an amused eyebrow at her and she shrugged.

"I figured you'd need it." She said by way of explanation.

"Thanks," Harry accepted the cane laying it beside him.

"Don't," Ginny said standing up easily, "I'm going back to bed. You

three have fun!" She twiddled her fingers at them in a wave and walked up the stairs to her dormitory.

"I envy her," Hermione said, "Once I'm awake there's no way I'd be able to fall back to sleep."

"Yeah," Harry grinned, "But it's waking you up that's the hard part."

"I think I'll take a page out of my sister's book," Ron said yawning, "I'm going back to bed too."

Hermione frowned at him, "We have classes today you know."

Ron just waved her off as he stumbled up the stairs.

Harry chuckled, "I'm with you on this one 'Mione," He said, "I doubt I'll be able to go back to sleep even if I did make it up the stairs with stiff muscles. Instead could you help me catch up with what I missed homework wise? I don't want to walk into classes my first day back and be behind."

"Certainly," Hermione smiled, "Let me go grab my notes, we can scan through them." She stood and paused then fell to her knees next to Harry again hugging him, "I am glad," She said smiling gently, "That you're back you know?"

Harry wrapped an arm around her returning her hug, "I know," he said, "Thank you."

She pulled back with a smile then stood again and walked quietly up the stairs.

Well there's the 18th chapter. The part with Ron at the top was tricky to explain. I hope I explained it well enough for it to be understood. Constructive criticism is always welcome. Thank you all for the reviews that keep coming I really love reading them and I often go

back to them in order to figure out what I need to do grammar wise.
Hope you enjoyed this chapter!

-Red

Back to School

Harry didn't go into the Great Hall for breakfast that morning. Instead he went on a trek to find Madam Sinistra's office hoping he could beg some food from her. He wasn't running away, at least that's what he kept telling himself, he simply wanted to check in with his sensei. Ok, so sleeping on the cold stone floors had not been his greatest idea ever. Every step he climbed made his legs twinge in protest. Harry refused even to wince knowing that climbing the stairs to the astronomy tower was going to make his legs stronger in the long run. He just had to keep moving...

"I always wished I could see you at you're weakest," A voice sneered from behind Harry, "But now that I see it I feel nothing but contempt and pity."

Harry froze a chill running down his spine. He hadn't heard the boy come up behind him. He hadn't felt him either. Gods damn this castle and its permeating magic everywhere.

"I assure you Malfoy," Harry said very quietly focusing all his senses behind him, "I am not at all weak."

A hatred emanated from the Slytherin boy that was deep. Harry shivered at its dark sickly taint in the boy he had always known to be just bitter and arrogant. The arrogance was gone, wiped clean out of the young man's system. Most likely beaten out of him by grief and filled with hatred strong enough to rival Tom Riddles.

"You shouldn't have come back potter," Draco Malfoy said quietly, icily, "You should have stayed hidden."

Hidden, he had said, not dead. Harry should have expected this. The first death by Harry's hand, even accidental as it had been, had been Malfoy senior, Draco's father.

"Do not threaten me Draco," Harry said quietly, "You're father killed himself when he stabbed me with my own wand. Do not assume I enjoyed the experience. It was the single most painful moment of my life."

Harry should have kept his words kinder but he spoke the truth as brutal as it was and now he paid for it as Draco ran from behind him kicking his cane away. Harry was forced to grab on to the banister of the stair. Draco closed the distance between them easily and quickly shoving his wand against Harry's neck.

"Was that supposed to make me feel sympathy?" He snarled, "I don't fucking care how my father's end came. Accident or not, unexpected or not, you are alive and he

is not!" The tip of Draco's wand began to warm but Harry did not flinch away from his gaze.

For a moment both boys stood still, pressed against each other with tension swirling in the air around them. Harry stared evenly into Draco's ferocious pale blue eyes. A shudder ran through Draco as he glared into Harry's unnervingly dual colored eyes and he pushed Harry hard against the railing.

"By my blood," Draco snarled, "I will avenge my father's death. By my magic," He growled pushing Harry again, "I will make you suffer." He pushed Harry one last time for emphasis then shoved himself away walking down the stairs with his robes billowing outward from behind him.

Harry watched Draco Malfoy go holding out a hand to his discarded cane silently summoning the object to him. His face was grim as he watched Draco walk out of sight. Swearing by blood was one thing, but swearing by magic was a tricky business. Often just mentioning it was like making an unbreakable vow. If Draco did not abide by his word, he risked his magic.

Harry felt a weight settle onto his shoulders. He could not be blamed for the former Malfoy Senior's death even if he felt somewhat responsible. The man had brought his death upon himself. Harry doubted Lucius would have stabbed him if he had known what the consequences were going to be.

Harry wondered if Draco had realized that, if he just needed someone to blame for his own grief. It was one more reason Harry needed to talk to Madam Sinistra. He needed to figure out a way to get used to all of this magic in the air. He was practically blind in the castle. And being blind in a place where at least one person swore vengeance upon your head was not a good thing to be.

When he reached the Astrology room Harry pushed his way inside using magic. His lower back was protesting his muscles, an effect of being shoved up against a banister. He probably had a bruise developing. He ignored the dull pain and concentrated on getting to Madam Sinistra's office. The door to her office was at the far left side of the room. Harry walked through the rows of desks trailing fingers upon the smooth surfaces until he reached her door where he paused.

In all likelihood she was expecting him. So he debated with himself on whether or not he should knock. He shrugged and did so anyways. When he heard his professor call 'enter' he opened the door to see her eating crumpets and drinking some tea. A plate steaming with eggs and sausages sat at the front of the desk she sat behind.

Harry grinned, "Expecting someone?" He asked gesturing to the ready made plate of food.

The corner of her mouth twitched, "Stop being cheeky," She said by way of explanation, "I assumed you'd have a few questions for me today, though I expected you a little earlier."

She glanced up from the paper she was preparing for her lecture that afternoon a single eyebrow raised in question.

Harry grimaced and took the seat that was placed before the plate, "I ran into a fervent well-wisher on my way up here," He stated morosely, "I think he bruised my spine."

"Ah," Madam Sinistra stated, "A great deal of children have lost family members over this summer," She watched Harry eat, "Some might wonder if you didn't have a hand in some of those deaths. You need to be careful."

"Would the majority of those children be in Slytherin?" Harry asked cheerfully.

"Unfortunately no," Madam Sinistra sighed, "Voldemort has many followers. They are not restricted to anything as simple as 'House'."

"So I could be attacked at anytime even in Hogwarts?" Harry asked seriously, "Should I be worried?"

"No," Madam Sinistra frowned thoughtfully, "I've noticed that children do not always follow their parents. Many of them may simply avoid you while some may even thank you. I don't know how this year will progress but I do know that Hogwarts is as safe as anyplace for you right now. I half expected the media to be at our doorstep in packs wanting to talk to the Boy-Who-Lived-Again."

Harry scowled, "I doubt Dumbledore will let them."

"Yes," Sinistra agreed, "I suppose he will be using his influence to protect you from that."

"But I don't feel safe here," Harry said setting his fork down with a small clink, "I can't feel anything Sensei," He looked at Sinistra who listened with a worried frown, "There's too much magic in the air, I

can't even sense you're aura and I'm sitting right across from you. I can barely see," He gestured to his golden eye, "This castle blinds me."

"Well, we'll have to change that won't we?" She asked.

"Madam?" Harry wondered what she meant, "How?"

"You will be meeting with me here tonight for potions anyway," She said, "We will work on conditioning you're body to these surroundings so you won't be so blind."

"Thank you Madam Sinistra," Harry said allowing muscles he hadn't felt tense begin to relax.

"Don't relax yet," Madam Sinistra said with a feral grin, "This training won't be in another plane like you're used to. It will be hard for you."

Harry nodded, "I expected as much."

"Good," Sinistra looked back at the lecture she'd been preparing, "Finish your eggs Mr. Potter. I don't want you passing out from overexertion."

Harry grinned, "Yes Ma'am."

Harry met Ron and Hermione in front of the Transfiguration classroom. They were a few minutes early so they were waiting outside in the hall. Hermione and Ron looked at Harry in askance wondering where he'd been. Harry smiled at them reassuringly.

"I was at Professor Sinistra's class room." He answered their questioning glances.

Hermione immediately looked at him concerned, "That's in the astronomy tower," She glanced at his legs, "That's a lot of stairs."

Harry rolled his eyes, "I was able to climb them without too much difficulty mother."

Hermione scowled at Harry, "I was just wondering."

"And I thank you for your concern but I wasn't in the hospital three months just twiddling my fingers," Harry said patiently.

"I know that," Hermione muttered with her arms crossed.

Harry grinned and the door to the classroom was thrown open with a harassed looking Professor McGonagall standing in its entrance.

"Well?" She asked with strained calm, "Will you lot be coming in?" Her voice was just as cross as her appearance suggested.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. They took a step forward when three Slytherins shoved their way through ahead of them. One looked at Harry and the two boys' eyes met. Harry kept his face carefully neutral as Draco Malfoy walked into the classroom with a stare of loathing that Harry recognized as being the same glare he'd received along with the bruise on his back.

"What's his problem?" Asked Hermione crossly.

"He blames me for his father's death," He said quietly.

"Lucius Malfoy's dead?" Ron asked surprised.

Harry smiled grimly, "Yeah," He said, "He was the first to go by my wand."

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry alarmed.

"Technically," Harry amended.

"Harry did you--?" Hermione asked carefully.

Harry shook his head, "He died by my wand, but not by my hand." Harry said, "I'll explain later. McGonagall doesn't seem in a mood to accept us if we're late."

The other two nodded. Harry had hinted that he'd killed to survive over the summer but he'd never elaborated other than that. Ron watched the back of Harry as he sat behind him in their usual seats. He'd been able to pin-point to an extent the spell that Ron had suffered under Dolores Umbridge's tutelage with one look. It really made Ron wonder what exactly his friend had been through.

He looked at the wood grains on his desk and thought not for the first time that he really needed to talk to Harry about what had happened while Harry had been in the hospital. If anyone could understand, truly, Ron felt it could be Harry.

Professor McGonagall stood in front of the classroom with a very stern look on her face. Every muscle in her frame was tense and she glared at the door as though willing it to disappear. Every student that walked in sat down immediately without a word sensing that today would not be one where they could risk talking out of turn. When the last student walked through the door she took a breath and launched strait into her lecture waving a wand at the board to write instructions.

She paused in her lecture to glance at Harry, "While I am glad you are back, I Learned from Madam Sinistra that you are to learn theory before trying any of these spells. I expect a foot written analysis about the theory of conjuration on my desk at the end of the period."

Harry nodded and opened his book to the section Professor McGonagall had been lecturing on all morning.

"May I ask why it is Mr. Potter is not to try practical application

today?" A high-pitched voice asked from the back of the classroom.

Professor McGonagall stiffened and turned slowly, "Professor Umbridge," McGonagall stated ice on her lips, "I didn't see you come in."

Harry cursed under his breath; once again he hadn't noticed when someone entered into the room. It was getting ridiculously old.

"I'm ever so sorry for my lateness," Dolores Umbridge stated with a large smile on her face.

She walked up through the rows of Students. Everyone watched her except Ron who kept a very carefully neutral expression on his face. Harry watched the toad-ish woman curiously. He'd really only had one encounter with her and it had been relatively uneducational. She walked up to Professor McGonagall and paused next to Ron giving the suddenly stoic red head a sickeningly sweet smile. Harry felt himself sit up straight as Ron flinched away from her as though her smile stung him. Professor McGonagall's eyes became murderous and she stepped up next to Ron placing a hand on his shoulder and forcing Dolores to take a step back.

"The ministry may have allowed you to stay in these walls," She said deathly quiet, "but in my class room you will remain at the back of my room out of the way of my student's concentration." Dolores's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"You do know why I am here?" She asked equally quietly.

"If you wish to evaluate my performance as a teacher you must want to observe me and my students in our natural states. Uninterrupted." She smiled at Umbridge.

It was not a kind smile.

"I was doing that until you decided to show...Mr. Potter, special attention," Dolores smiled, "I doubt you use favoritism often. You're reputation at least suggests as much." She said reputation as though she did not believe it.

"If you haven't noticed Dolores," McGonagall said carefully, "Young Mr. Potter does not have a wand. What I teach in this classroom is transfiguration using a wand. His tutor has explained to me that he is here to learn the theory of transfiguration so that his tutor can better explain the spells to him wandlessly."

"Wandless!" Professor Umbridge scoffed, "I doubt he could levitate so much as a quill. Only masters can attempt wandless magic."

A black quill hit the side of her head and she looked at it startled.

"I can't levitate a quill, per say, but I can certainly move it." Harry said lazily spinning a quill in the air above his palm.

Before Umbridge could utter a reply Professor McGonagall grabbed the quill he played with from the air with a stern glare, "That will be quite enough Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled innocently at Professor McGonagall and ignored the snickers and whispers aimed in Harry's direction. Then he looked at Ron and his smile faded. The boy was staring determinedly at the desk in front of him a dark frown on his face.

"I'm sorry professor," Harry said shame faced.

Professor McGonagall frowned at him then looked at Dolores Umbridge, "Shall I continue my lesson where I left off Inquisitor?" She asked darkly.

Professor Umbridge frowned and nodded regally waddling back to the back of the room.

"One foot Mr. Potter," Minerva stated handing his quill back to him.

Harry nodded solemnly and got back to work.

The students walked out of the classroom discussing that day's class. Furtive glances were continually being shot in Harry's direction. He ignored them keeping his eyes carefully on his friends as they discussed the homework still standing at their desks. Ron excused himself and went to talk to professor McGonagall. Harry's eyes traveled with him.

"She was the first teacher he'd talk to," Hermione said quietly.

Professor McGonagall pulled Ron around the desk so she could talk to him quietly. Her eyes were sad, her expression gentle. Harry watched her talk to Ron and watched Ron's strained smile.

"Hermione," Harry asked quietly, "What exactly happened?"

Hermione's expression darkened, "He did something stupid, to protect the other students. He felt, I suppose, with your absence that it was up to him to try to protect the others. He didn't need to do it, but he did."

Harry frowned, "You're skirting around the subject Hermione."

Hermione shook her head, "It's his story to tell, Harry." She looked into his eyes solemnly, "We don't push you to tell us about what happened to you so don't push him. I just want you to understand why he did it. So you don't judge him too harshly when he does tell you."

Harry played with his quill twirling the wooden shaft around his fingers thinking. When he told them what happened to him that summer, what he did, would they judge him harshly?

"How can I judge my brother?" Harry asked quietly, "After all that I have done?"

Hermione bit her lower lip and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, "You know," She stated quietly, "Sometimes I think what happened to Ron is because you two do everything together. You'll even go so far as to break together."

"I don't want that," Harry said sharply.

"No," Hermione agreed, "I don't either. I never wanted it. For either of you." Her eyes held his steadily a sorrow he recognized from that day at the hospital before he'd left.

Harry sighed and placed a hand on her shoulder leaning his head against her forehead, "I'm healing," He reminded her, "So will Ron."

"There are some wounds that fester," Hermione said, "Some wounds that never go away completely." She was still watching him with eyes that were too clear and knowing.

She'd always been able to see through him. Always the clear headed one of their small trio. He smiled a little and let go gathering his books together. Ron walked to his desk and grabbed his things looking a little calmer but still perturbed. Harry watched him place his things in his bag mechanically. He looked at Hermione and grinned a little. She gave him a confused look. He winked and straitened his face.

They were walking out when Harry threw an arm around Ron with a huge grin on his face, "Herbology!" He said exuberantly, "Aren't you excited for Herbology?"

Ron jumped a little, "What are you on about?" He asked staring at Harry as though he'd grown a second head.

"All that greenery! The soft smell of earth!" He practically sang, "And always the small chance that a plant might bite or sting Malfoy!" He sighed dramatically, "It could easily be my favorite class!"

Hermione hit Harry lightly, "He's being sarcastic Ron." She was trying not to grin.

"I would hope so," Ron said rolling his eyes almost forgetting about Umbridge, "Herbology is boring."

"Remember the biting and stinging." Harry said mock seriously.

"Yeah, those bloody plants could bite or sting me!" Ron pointed out, "A trip to the infirmary is hardly exciting."

"No," Hermione smiled, "But it would be amusing."

"For the rest of us," Harry added.

The two of them grinned brightly at Ron. Ron shrugged Harry's arm off him and rolled his eyes.

"Gee," He said flatly, "Thanks. Good to know you care."

"Oh we'd laugh," Hermione said, "At first."

"Then we'd probably poke you to make sure you're alive," Harry nodded.

"Then we'd take you to the infirmary ourselves," Hermione smiled.

"After we confirmed you were indeed alive." Harry stated.

Hermione glared at Harry, "The point is we would care enough to carry you."

"Hermione would be carrying you." Harry pointed out.

"Yeah because a gimp like you couldn't carry your own books let alone me," Ron said.

Harry patted his book bag, "I can to carry my books."

"In a bag." Ron pointed out.

"You still carry you're books?" Harry asked, "Not cool man." He shook his head disappointed.

"What, a bag is?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry said straight faced, "It's the new fashion."

"That sounded gay," Ron deadpanned.

"I'm running out of comebacks," Harry deadpanned back.

Hermione rolled her eyes pushing the doors of the greenhouse open ahead of the boys. Harry had successfully gotten Ron's mind off of Transfiguration. She was grateful. Ron would have been moody the rest of the day if he hadn't.

The class was relatively uneventful, with the exception of the whispering students. A couple of them had walked in front of Harry then jumped away from him when they realized. Some had been so intent on staring at his scars and unusual eyes that they had messed up the re-potting of the plant they'd been growing. After yet another person couldn't hold Harry's gaze Draco Malfoy stood abruptly and used the excuse that he needed to use the restroom and left with a look of utter disgust on his face.

Harry was getting more and more tense as the lesson went on.

"It's not like I didn't expect it," He told Hermione and Ron bitterly, "It's just really bloody annoying."

Hermione sighed, "They can't help it, you have always been, 'The-Boy-Who-Lived', but that was when you were a baby. You were special, but to kids who weren't there when you made Tommy disappear...it was just a story. You never really did anything to make the story they grew up with concrete." She was cleaning her hands as she spoke, "Now here you are, back from the dead. Now you really do own the title, 'The-Boy-Who-Lives'."

"Great," Harry sighed.

"I bet some of them think you really are dead," Hermione continued, "Like maybe you're a ghost."

"Or a Vampire," Ron snickered, "Count Potter, brilliant."

Harry rolled his eyes, "I'm not about to start drinking blood."

"It probably wouldn't be so bad if you hadn't blown the great hall doors open," Hermione berated.

Harry frowned, "I couldn't get the doors open, what else was I supposed to do? Knock?"

"Probably," Hermione said.

"Oh yeah," Harry rolled his eyes, "What a wonderful idea, knock on the great double doors and hope someone would hear me above the din of the students eating." He looked at Hermione exasperated, "I would have been standing there for hours. Then the doors would open to an ominous figure anyways when students were filing out."

"You didn't see yourself that night," Ron said, "You looked down right

evil mate."

"Maybe that's the problem," Harry said, "Some students must think I'm some evil wizard now or something."

"That could be the rumor," Hermione said.

"Brilliant," Harry deadpanned, "It'll be like second year all over again."

"Don't worry," Ron said, "Soon they'll recognize you for the idiot you are and realize you couldn't possibly be evil."

Harry frowned, "And that was supposed to make me feel better?"

"Look out," Hermione stated.

"Ow!" Harry plopped his finger into his mouth as his friends laughed at him.

"All right Mr. Potter," Professor Sprout walked over with a couple of parchments in her fists, "These are the—Oh lovely, you pricked you're finger did you?"

Harry nodded feeling glob sized tears building in his eyes and a little dizzy.

Professor Sprout sighed, "Wonderful," She said, "This is why we keep gloves on at all times in the Green House. Miss. Granger, Mr. Weasley, please take him to the infirmary."

The two nodded and looked at Harry, the tips of his ears were turning green.

Ron knelt next to Harry with a slight smirk on his face and poked him, "You alive?" He asked sarcastically.

Harry glared a little at the smirking Ron, the irony not being lost on him at all.

By the time they made it to the infirmary, the arm with the finger he'd pricked and his entire face was a deep emerald green. Madam Pomfrey took one look at Harry, sighed, and pointed to a bed. She carefully gave him a potion that smelled similar to the plant Harry had pricked himself with. He downed it and handed back the empty bottle with a grimace. The green began to fade almost immediately.

"You can go Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said, "The green should be gone within the hour."

"Thank you Madam," Harry said smiling.

"Hmm," Madam Pomfrey regarded him carefully, "Don't forget tomorrow I want to give a full examination. We need to make sure you're recovering well now that you're out of the Hospital."

"Tomorrow?" Harry asked, "Not today?"

"I believe it was placed on your schedule," Madam Pomfrey stated, "You will be coming here once every two weeks so that I can chart your progress."

Harry groaned.

"Didn't Minerva give you your schedule?" She asked.

"She did," Harry said, "I just haven't had a chance to really look at it."

"Then get to it," Madam Pomfrey stated, "Madam Sinistra won't be happy with you if you're late because you forgot to look at it."

Harry nodded solemnly, "I will."

Madam Pomfrey nodded then shooed him out of the infirmary. Harry met his friends, still slightly green, and nodded happily. Ron snickered and cracked a joke about him and the trio went on to their next class.

Well theres the next chapter. It's a little shorter then I wanted but only by so much so I figured it would be ok. Hope you all enjoyed it. Thanks for all the reviews, please keep them coming! Constructive criticism is always welcome!

-Red

The Big Bang Theory

The next class, History of Magic was completely uneventful for Harry. Sure the students were more interested in him than in Professor Bins but seeing as how students looked for anything to distract them in that class Harry wasn't about to care. He ignored them, read about the lesson in the book rather than trying to listen and possibly garnered a little more knowledge about the subject by doing so.

When the class exited Harry waved a fond farewell to Hermione and Ron and ignored the curious stares of his peers as he turned in the opposite direction from the Dungeons. He'd been given leave to learn potions from a different instructor. There was no way he was going to spend two hours with a Death Eater. Harry knew Snape was no longer anything. He'd met him a few times this past summer helping out his buddies with frightening accuracy.

Harry smiled grimly to himself again not understanding why Dumbledore trusted the man. A spy? Maybe, but he was playing spy for both sides and Harry wouldn't hand his life over to such a man for two hours. Not with the risks involved.

He stopped and sighed, his legs were getting thoroughly tired of steps. They were quickly becoming the bane of his existence. He almost feared facing the multitude of steps in the school to Voldemort simply because of how sore they were making him become. Speaking of the other bane to his existence Harry pressed his palm against his forehead. A pressure had been building around his scar for the past few days. It had been easy to ignore because all the excitement of coming back had been a wonderful and terrifying distraction.

Ignore it, he continued to say to himself, It will go away soon. Concentrate on the stairs.

He watched his feet and concentrated on placing one foot in front of

the other balancing himself with the cane when the pain in his forehead escalated and the world turned frighteningly bright. He clamped his eyes shut and clenched his teeth fighting not to scream as he felt as though his head were tearing itself apart from the inside out.

He breathed slowly focusing on only that. Chills were running up and down his spine as he slowly lowered himself fumbling with his left hand feeling the rough stone steps and reassuring himself he wasn't going to fall backward. He felt taught, stretched as though his mind were being pulled away from his skull. The thoughts that were running away from him were gripped together by a sickly green glowing string.

"Shit," Harry hissed painfully.

He'd been warned, by Sinistra that this was going to happen eventually. She'd tied the connection but she'd told him the knot she'd created might snap apart. Harry simply hadn't thought about it. It had seemed like a distant possibility, not anything immediate. He began to shake, fire whispered against the back of his hands as the pain began to threaten his tentative control.

"Harry?" A young voice asked concerned, "Harry Potter?"

Harry's eyes snapped open. He couldn't see, his eyes were focusing on the magic around him so much so that it was intensified to the point that he literally could not make out anything in front of him.

"Oh no," He gasped.

"Harry?" A girl, a young girl, persistent, "Are you all right?"

Dread settled like sand in his stomach trickling down in gritty despair. He wasn't stable; he shouldn't have anyone near him right now.

"No!" He growled, "Get away from me!"

He pushed his hand around in the air in front of him trying to push the girl he couldn't see away. The heat was rising, his fire responding to his desperation and pain.

"You're hands--!" He heard the girl gasp, "They're on fire!"

"Really?" His gasp was half hysterical, "You need to leave!" He screamed pushing himself away from the concerned girl, "Go!" He gasped feeling a wave of heat beginning to build, "Run!"

He could feel her hesitate, "I could help--."

"No you couldn't!" Harry said cutting her off.

"Then I'll go get someone--." She said.

"YES!" Harry yelled the fire was creeping up his arms and building in his chest, it was all he could do to hold himself still, "Madam—Professor Sinistra! Go!"

He could feel her pause next to him. He shot his eyes up to glare desperately at where he thought she'd be and he heard a gulp before she took off at a trot up the stairs.

"Not fast enough!" He yelled after her.

She began to run finally catching on to the desperation in his voice. He literally felt as though if he held in the pain anymore he was going to explode. He screamed the sound tearing out of his throat. Fire erupted out of his skin taking the stair way into its smoldering embrace. The screams of portraits followed his flames and he threw his head back releasing the fire that had been building up in his chest. His mind felt as though it couldn't be pulled any further before his body snapped backward arching as a piece of plastic stretched too

thin. He became ridged and all thought halted in realization and pain.

For a moment he could see a dark room with peeling green and black striped wall paper. There were empty frames of vivid color where a picture had once sat; clean wall paper gave the impression of a green and black window. There was magic somewhere in the air but it was faint as though he looked at it through a foggy lens. Heavy curtains pulled shut were grey with dust and a rusted mirror at the corner of his vision was covered by a drape. Then it was all he could do not to scream as the room tumbled away and Harry was within his own mind once again. His body fell back with a snap that felt hundreds of miles away. He didn't even notice as the back of his head hit the sharp edge of the stone stairway beneath him.

He felt cut in half, torn down the middle of his person. He realized as he drifted, his body glowing like the embers of a flame, that something had just been lost and that during one single moment in his pain he and his nemesis had both experienced something untouchable. He'd shared not only a mind and two bodies with Voldemort but a soul as well, and that had just been torn literally into two pieces. Tears welled up in his eyes, he still couldn't see but he was sure that he would be able to again shortly. Why was he crying? What was it that he'd lost? More importantly, why couldn't he pass out?

"Mr. Potter," Madam Sinistra's voice was breathy, she must have run down the steps, "Great Gods child, I thought I taught you control."

She sounded cross; she always got cross when she was scared.

"I can't see," He whispered, it hurt to talk, hurt to breathe actually...

"Quiet," Madam Sinistra commanded, "Dora, go get madam Pomfrey, I think it would be a bad idea to move him."

"Yes Professor," There was a great deal of hesitance in the voice but

Harry recognized it as the girl he'd almost just killed with his fire.

He felt his lids fall over his eyes a weird feeling considering there was no difference when they closed to when they were open.

"You're lucky Charlie Weasley gave you that cloak. Dragon hide is completely resistant to flame," She was doing something with her wand, he could tell because the magic made his skin itch.

"What are you--?"

"I'm dousing you," Madam Sinistra stated, "You're glowing like an ember. You're also smoking."

"Oh." Harry said.

"You're in shock," He could hear the frown in her voice when she spoke.

"Yep." Harry agreed.

The sound of several footsteps echoed across the eerily silent tower and a shrill voice was speaking crossly to the harried sound of Madam Pomfrey.

"I assure you I do not need any assistance in this matter Madam Umbridge," madam Pomfrey stated as she neared the stairs, "I am perfectly capable of taking care of my—Merlin!" She paused at the bottom of the stairs and stared with wide eyes at the charred black walls and incinerated portraits which still burned on their hangings.

"Madam Pomfrey please," Madam Sinistra stated with a steel calm, "I think he hit the back of his head, there's more blood than there should be."

"I think I'm starting to see again," Harry stated absently.

"Good," Madam Sinistra stated, "Keep trying to focus. I'm going to try to conjure some pants for you at least.

"Pants?" Harry asked.

"You incinerated your last pair," She explained.

The back of his head began to itch and he heard Madam Pomfrey groan a little, "Well this is going to be tricky," She said, "I'm going to need help Emily, he hit his head on the edge of the stair."

"What?" Madam Sinistra asked.

Harry was surprised at the shock and fear that he felt from her words. He really wished he could see her face properly. As it was she was still a fuzzy blur.

"There's a lot of blood so I can't be certain," Madam Pomfrey assured, "It looks like his skull is a bit cracked but I don't think that he's in threat of brain damage..."

"You don't think?" Madam Sinistra asked incredulously.

"No," Madam Pomfrey said, "I don't."

"But you're not sure?" She asked.

"I'm quite sure." She stated.

Harry felt a glare upon his face and knew his instructor was upset, "Why is it always you?" She asked.

Her voice seemed to shake a little. Harry twitched his hand lifting it carefully. A cold rough hand shoved his arm back down.

"Don't move," Madam Sinistra snapped.

The corner of Harry's lips twitched, she was scared, really scared if his guess was right.

"What the blazes is going on here?" Dolores Umbridge shrieked.

Hands grabbed Harry's head as his body twitched from the unexpected mass of volume from Professor Umbridge. He heard her stomping up the stairs in her small heels and he grimaced as he began to notice the pain at the back of his head.

"What-what is this?" She asked hysterically, "Why is everything burned? What happened?" Her eyes were darting around the room in shock.

"We are not sure exactly just yet Madam Umbridge," Professor Sinistra said carefully, "Right now we are more concerned with Mr. Potter then we are the what and how."

"Mr. Potter?" She asked and looked at Harry, "Great Merlin! Mr. Potter!" She took in a deep breath and stepped back her face turning a deep shade of puce in anger, "Indecent!" She partly shrieked, partly hissed, "What do you think you are--?"

"That is completely irrelevant!" Madam Pomfrey snapped, "Emily, if you would help me levitate his body? Carefully! We don't want to risk moving his back to much."

For a moment he felt as though his body were heavier than a ton of bricks then his body was lifted slowly from the stone. He cried out in pain as his head left the stair it had fallen on.

"What are you doing?" Shrieked Umbridge, "That boy needs to be questioned not levitated!"

"Madam Umbridge!" Sinistra snapped, "Right now my main concern is the safety of my charge! Not his state of undress. So either leave or help us!" Her voice was steel brooking no room for argument.

Madam Sinistra glared darkly at her co-worker as Professor Umbridge glared at the three of them. She glared once more at the charred walls and stairs and turned on her heel leaving with a look of thunder on her face.

Harry winced, "I can see again," he informed, "Can I pass out now?"

"I'm surprised you haven't yet," Madam Pomfrey stated, "Yes, I'll even help. This will be much easier if you're asleep."

"Wonderful," Harry sighed allowing the sleep spell Madam Pomfrey cast help him into oblivion.

"Between the two of you I will never be able to complain of a dull moment," Hermione hissed angrily to Ron as she sat on the edge of Harry's bed, "Just what was he doing falling down the stairs? He knows how to walk doesn't he?"

"Hermione," Ron said quietly, "Are you really asking that? Do you notice how he hobbles?"

"I've noticed," Hermione hissed, "I'm just, I'm upset."

"I know you are," Ron said rolling his eyes, "You're not the only one. What about all that training he had with his fire? He burned half the portraits in the Astronomy tower. How did he lose control like that?"

"Not even back for two days," Hermione growled, "Two bloody days Ron. Does he go looking for trouble?"

"I don't look for it," Harry muttered groggily, "It wasn't my fault."

Hermione's angry demeanor vanished in the instant Harry began talking. Tears welled up in her eyes and she launched herself across the bed latching her arms around Harry. Harry's eyes shot open as all her weight slammed onto him and he gasped.

"Oof!" He uttered, "Hermione what are you trying to do? Crush me?"

"Stupid, bloody, git!" She growled as tears slipped down her face.

Harry looked at Ron with wide eyes. Ron smiled grimly at him.

"It's nice hearing her call someone else a stupid git," He admitted, "Though you're not off the hook mate, I'm a little peeved myself. We can't leave you alone for two hours?" He asked with a frown.

Harry frowned back and rubbed Hermione's shoulder blades carefully, "I didn't want to explode you know. I was terrified I was gonna kill that girl. Wait, that girl?" His eyes shot around the bed worriedly, "Where is she? I didn't hurt her did I?"

"There was a girl?" Hermione asked pulling back to look at Harry confused.

"Yeah, she tried to help me when I was telling her to get away from me," Harry nodded, "She said she was going to get Madam Sinistra but she wasn't running fast enough..." Harry's face turned white, "I couldn't hold it back..."

"She's fine," Madam Pomfrey said as she swept into the room, "Her name is Doralie Whimbleby, a second year Hufflepuff student. She got to Madam Sinistra in time to only have a few mild burns in the back of her legs and arms."

Harry closed his eyes in relief and relaxed back into the bed, "Great,"

He said sarcastically.

"Can you see Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

Harry opened his eyes looking as directly at her as they allowed and nodded, "Yeah," He smiled weakly, "I can see as well as I normally do."

"I'll test that in a moment," She nodded, "Miss. Granger, if you would please remove yourself from Mr. Potter I can start a full examination of his progress."

Hermione blushed and nodded moving back to the end of the bed. Ron placed a hand on her shoulder and she grabbed his hand in her own for reassurance.

"Can you sit up?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

Harry nodded pushing himself up. He clutched the sheets as a wave of dizziness threatened to push him back to the bed.

"Hmm..." Madam Pomfrey frowned, "Maybe I should have sent you to St. Mungos."

Harry Shook his head desperately then wished he hadn't. He groaned and lay back down.

"I just got back," He looked at her pleadingly, "Please don't send me to St. Mungos."

"The hit to your head wasn't as severe as I thought it was but I still would like a second opinion..." She said, "Head injuries are tricky even after they are healed. I don't want you to experience any long lasting effects."

Harry nodded sadly, "I understand."

Madam Pomfrey regarded him with crossed arms and pursed lips for a few moments then she sighed, "I have a friend I can call who specializes in head injuries." She finally said, "I might be able to convince him to come and take a look at you for me."

Harry's expression instantly brightened, "Really?" He asked.

"Maybe," Madam Pomfrey sighed, "But for now you are going to have a few visitors who would really like an explanation. I'll let Sinistra and Dumbledore in first." She looked at Hermione and Ron, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to kick you two out."

"He's going to tell us anyways," Ron said shrugging.

Madam Pomfrey's lips pursed further as she regarded them, "If he tells you later I don't care but while the ministry and Dumbledore question him I can't have you in the room."

Ron and Hermione stiffened and looked like they were about to argue but as Madam Pomfrey glared at them they both decided it would be easier not to argue and get what happened from Harry afterwards. They both stood and touched Harry's foot with meaningful looks before leaving. He nodded to them as they left silently promising he would talk later.

Dumbledore and Madam Sinistra entered just after they left. Conjuring chairs they sat next to his bed and waited as Madam Pomfrey flitted around Harry taking diagnostics with her wand. Harry looked at his two instructors and winced at the white faced Madam Sinistra. She was watching him like a hawk watches a piece of prey. He supposed it was her own silent way of telling him she was still worried.

"Well Harry?" Dumbledore asked quietly, "Would you like to tell us what happened?"

Harry nodded and took a calming breath, "The knot Madam Sinistra tied on my link with Voldemort broke." He shuddered a little as he admitted it, "I...lost control when it happened. It was...an odd experience."

Madam Sinistra and Dumbledore looked at each other gravely, "We thought that might have been what happened," Madam Sinistra admitted, "I hadn't expected it to happen so soon."

"What exactly happened?" Dumbledore asked.

"I'm really not sure," Harry stated, "One second I was climbing the steps of the Astronomy tower, the next my world turns white and a pain I can't even describe threatens to open my head up. That girl, Doralie? I heard her ask me what was wrong and I panicked. I told her to get away from me because I could control my fire. I thought it was going to consume me."

"You're lucky it didn't," Madam Sinistra said.

Harry nodded, "Yeah, lucky." He agreed, "But then...then I didn't know where I was. I was looking at a wall with dark grey striped wall paper and an empty clean square where a picture might've sat. I wasn't in my head anymore...Then," Harry's eyes looked empty as he seemed to be looking far off in the distance.

His face became pale as he remembered the feeling of snapping in two then slamming back into himself. He shook as he thought about it. A cold hand slapping onto his bare bicep snapped him out of his flashback. He looked blankly at Madam Sinistra's face with worry.

"I lost something," He breathed, "I don't know what it was but I lost something important."

Madam Sinistra and Dumbledore looked at each other, "Harry,"

Dumbledore said quietly, "May I have your permission to enter your mind?"

Harry nodded.

Dumbledore moved up to the edge of his seat and carefully took Harry's face into his wizened warm hands. His icy blue eyes looked into Harry's dual colored irises and he gently moved into Harry's mind. For a long time Harry could feel the warm breeze that was Dumbledore's magic sink into the nooks and crannies of his memory. He could see all the things that Dumbledore sifted through behind his eyelids. There were holes in his memory, from when he was a child and a few memories that made no sense to Harry at all. He wouldn't have noticed them except that Dumbledore paused at each one and showed them to him. They weren't even full memories really just images, snippets of blurred things half forgotten.

"Those aren't mine," Harry said quietly.

"I know," Dumbledore said gravely, "They are not."

He sighed and extracted himself from Harry's mind leaning back in his chair heavily.

"Then whose are they?" Harry asked feeling his stomach begin to knot in foreboding.

"They are Tom Riddles." Dumbledore stated seriously, "Before he was Voldemort."

Harry paled his eyes shooting to the bed sheets that were clutched in his hands, "Then what did I lose?"

"Memories," Dumbledore said, "and something else though I could not tell you what."

"Why can't you?" Harry asked quietly.

"Harry," Madam Sinistra commanded, "Tell me what you meant when you said you 'lost something'."

"When we," Harry shuddered, "When we...separated...something snapped, split in half. It felt as though a small part of me had died. I could feel it die, it wasn't me, but it was a part of me." He looked up at Madam Sinistra and Dumbledore worried, "Does that make sense?"

"It makes a great deal of sense," Dumbledore said quietly, "And yet it makes no sense at all. I need to research something to be certain, but I think maybe you won't need to worry too much about Voldemort having easy access to your mind right now. Although..." Dumbledore put a thoughtful hand to his chin, "Can you still speak Parseltongue?"

Harry frowned, "I don't honestly know. It's not like I know when I'm doing it."

"Hmmm...But I can still see a thread of the connection," Madam Sinistra said, "It isn't over yet."

"You're damned right it isn't Madam!" The door slammed open and a furious looking Cornelius Fudge swept into the room, "What is the meaning of this Dumbledore? The boy is combustible? Dangerous? Almost killed one of the other students?"

Harry paled, "There wasn't another person on the stairwell was there?" He asked Dumbledore stricken.

"No there was not and Doralie got away with barely a scratch on her," Madam Sinistra stated, "There is no threat here Minister."

"I beg to differ!" Cornelius shouted, "Madam Umbridge just showed me the Astronomy Tower. If you are telling me that that boy!" He pointed a stubby angry finger at Harry, "Is not responsible and that I

should believe such I will assure you that child will be locked up on a one way ticket to isolation!"

"It is not in your legal right to make such an unfounded decision!" Madam Sinistra snarled, "He has committed no crime! He has legal guardians that have entrusted Albus Dumbledore as the only person who can say yay or nay to whether or not he leaves these school grounds as his sole solicitor in the Wizard community while he is in school!"

"I am the Minister of Magic!" Cornelius snarled back, "And he has not only endangered the life of another student he has also made considerable damage to this prestigious school's property!"

"To which the head of this school will hold him responsible for," Dumbledore stated, "We are aware and were warned by him of his explosive ability and are working with him on how to control it in a safe secluded room that has been sufficiently fire-proofed," Albus continued placating, "It is unfortunate he lost control on the way to said lessons with Madam Sinistra here. You know as well as I that Madam Sinistra's superior use of Runes allows her to make some of the strongest containment shields ever created."

"But you said it yourself," Fudge replied, "He lost control on the way to the lesson! What if it happens again with more students in the corridor next time?"

"It won't!" Harry interjected his knuckles were white as he clutched his blanket to him, "It will never happen again." His eyes were steel as he spoke the resolution.

"How can I trust the words of the child who lost control?" Fudge interjected angrily.

"Because I don't want to hurt anybody!" Harry said with conviction, "I don't want any more innocent blood on my hands then I all ready

have."

Fudge stared at Harry angrily, "That isn't enough."

"If you knew Mr. Potter then you would think otherwise," Dumbledore stated quietly.

"The fact of the matter is this!" Fudge pointed a large finger at Harry, "That boy is dangerous!"

"Then I will bind him!" Sinistra snapped.

"E-excuse me?" Fudge stammered.

"He is my Apprentice," She stated, "Though unofficially. I will make it official with the binding ceremony. It will temper his magic until we are certain he can retain complete control of it. Will that satisfy you?"

"Do you know what that could do to you if he has another explosive episode?" Fudge asked incredulously.

"Of course I know." Madam Sinistra sniffed, "I have had an apprentice before."

Fudge opened and closed his mouth like a fish for several seconds before his face began to turn puce, "Very well," He said grudgingly, "I will accept this. But if something like this occurs again...That boy will be in Ministry custody!"

With that declaration the Minister spun out of the room his robes billowing behind him. Harry looked at Madam Sinistra who had at some point in the argument jumped to her feet. She stood with her head held up defiantly and her back ram-rod strait. He looked at Dumbledore who was gazing silently at Harry with steeped fingers.

"What does she mean, 'bind'?" He asked carefully.

"Very little," Dumbledore smiled, "Just that Madam Sinistra will have access to your magic if she needs to calm it down."

"How?" Harry asked frowning.

"By binding some of my magic to yours," Madam Sinistra sat back down with a sigh, "It's an old technique rarely used anymore because if used wrongly it can violate the rights of the student. It was once used to help a student tap into areas of their magic they normally would not be able to tap into by themselves and teach them spells through the feel of the magic used to perform them."

"So you'd be...controlling my magic?" Harry asked horrified.

"It can be used for that, and has been before," Sinistra stated, "That is why all apprentices must be registered for their own protection so that if needed they can complain to the ministry and the link can be safely abolished."

Harry stared at his instructor with wide eyes.

"I will not be using it for that purpose," Madam Sinistra assured her pupil, "You hardly need it. This outburst would not have happened if I hadn't tied your link to Voldemort. It will be there as a precaution only, and so that the Ministry can feel better about itself."

"None of the other obligations of an Apprentice will be imposed on you," Dumbledore stated calmly, "Though because you will be registered I assume a Ministry official will be sent to witness the ceremony."

"We'll need consent from your guardians as well." Madam Sinistra agreed.

"Wait," Harry held up a hand, "What do you mean by 'other

obligations'?"

"Normally this binding would require oaths of servitude." Madam Sinistra explained, "But seeing as how this is hardly a normal situation I will not."

Harry still looked worried and uncertain.

Madam Sinistra sighed, "Nothing will change between you and I Mr. Potter," She said reassuringly, "Only that I can stop your magic if you are going to have another outburst."

Harry nodded slowly still trying to digest the implications. He didn't like it, to be perfectly honest. It meant that another being would have power over him and that was not something Harry was very fond of.

"Look," Madam Sinistra stated sighing knowing her pupil well enough to know that he was less than thrilled, "This is only for posterities sake. If you want we can include in the contract an oath that I will not abuse this power you will be giving me. Wizard contracts are magically binding. I may come to some serious harm if I break it. And you know me well enough to understand that I always keep my word."

Harry nodded again, this time more reassured, "Then you meant it when you said nothing will change?"

"Well there will always be side effects to this sort of magic Harry," Dumbledore warned, "But they shouldn't be enough to intrude on your privacy. Not if the contract is written correctly."

"And my solicitor will make sure that it's written correctly," Madam Sinistra vowed, "Mark my words."

"They're marked." Harry smiled.

Madam Sinistra smiled as well, "Good."

"Now we have that settled I believe Madam Pomfrey has a friend that is coming to have a look at your head," Dumbledore smiled, "I will expect you in my office tomorrow morning for Occlumens training and to discuss more about what happened in the Astronomy tower."

"Of course," Harry nodded, "The Boy-Who-Lived doesn't get any reprieve time." He rolled his eyes dramatically and threw an arm over his forehead, "Welcome back, me."

Madam Sinistra rolled her eyes as Dumbledore chuckled. They exited with polite farewells and Harry watched them go feeling a small weight settle upon his shoulders. His hands shook a little as they clutched his sheets. He and Voldemort had...that experience had been...Great Merlin. There was a lot his mind needed to process, he needed to meditate to get all his thoughts in order...but he was so blasted tired. His energy had been drained in the Astronomy tower.

Why was it that not even two days back he'd had to visit the hospital ward three times? Harry toyed with the idea of just setting up permanent residence in the room. Forget Gryffindor tower, this was really the place the fates wanted him. He rolled over fighting a wave of dizziness and shivered. He needed to sleep, badly. It was in his experience that good rest was the quickest way to heal...but he couldn't. He couldn't get the feeling he'd done something terribly wrong. Like a taboo, like a line had been crossed and couldn't be erased. He felt tainted, dirty, and it wasn't the type of dirt that could be washed away with water.

Harry heard the door creak open. He glanced at the door watching two familiar heads pop into the room. Hermione and Ron crept forward across the room to Harry's bed. They pulled the curtains around them and sat down on either side of him. He didn't look up at them as he greeted them.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, "Are you going to tell us what happened?" She asked carefully.

Harry slowly looked at her debating internally. Her large brown eyes watched him with concern. Harry couldn't look into those innocent eyes so he looked at Ron. Ron's silent forward look held Harry's gaze for a moment and Harry knew that he had to say it. He recognized the dull glow in Ron's eyes. Recognized it all too well. He looked back at Hermione and smiled carefully.

"It's going to be ok," He said to her as though he were speaking to that small part in him that was still clean, that was hurting.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other alarmed and then back at Harry, "What?" Hermione asked.

Harry took a deep breath, "Voldemort and I—we have that connection right?"

His two friends nodded.

"Well Madam Sinistra tied it at the beginning of term and..." Harry shrugged.

"It broke?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "It did. And when it did..." Harry shook a little rolling on his side to stare at Hermione's knee, "We...we were one person. One being. Not physically, maybe mentally...but it was more than that. I felt his slimy, disgusting," His voice shuddered and he closed his eyes, "He was in me, I was in him...I can't explain it except to say that it was violating."

He clutched the sheets and pulled his knees up to his chest opening his eyes to stare blankly as his face turned white. Ron stiffened next to him and Hermione grabbed Harry's shoulder leaning over him to

hear him for he had begun to whisper.

"I was him. For a moment, I was Voldemort..." Harry whispered, "I was pure evil in every sense of the word. And the power, in that single moment, that I felt...It was," He choked, "Intoxicating."

"Harry," Hermione shook him a little, "Harry!"

He didn't respond he just shook. Hermione could feel heat rising from his skin. Ron jumped off the bed.

"Hermione get away from him!" Ron snapped.

Hermione narrowed her eyes and jumped up whipping out her wand.

"Hermione—what?" Ron asked alarmed.

She swished her wand at Harry and a stream of very cold water rushed over Harry. The boy in the bed jumped snapping out of his memory as the freezing liquid made contact with his skin.

"What--?" Harry asked startled.

Hermione grabbed his face and forced him to look at her, "Stop it!" She snapped.

"Stop what?" Harry cried, "You're the one who threw water on me!"

"Yeah!" Hermione nodded sternly, "I did. Because while you may have experienced something...awful," She shook her head angrily, "You are not evil. You are not Voldemort. You are a separate person." Hermione stated, "And you are not only connected to him!"

Harry pulled himself away from her, and pushed himself up with one hand, "What do you mean not only?" Harry asked suddenly angry, "He's the one that I'm tied to magically! Who else is connected to me

huh? I have no family! Except for a couple of abusive, filthy, Muggles who don't want anything to do with me! Or did you forget? I'm alone!"

He felt the sting of the slap that connected to his cheek after Hermione's arms wrapped around him crushing him to her.

"Idiot!" She snarled into his hair, "Stupid, bloody, git!" She pulled away from him to look into his shocked face, "Did you forget about us? I'm your sister you prick! Ron, your brother! Our families are your families! Oh and by the way? Two people of that family are filthy Muggles."

Harry looked at Hermione touching the cheek she'd slapped, "I didn't mean—didn't think..."

"No you didn't think about us did you?" Hermione asked tears held unshed in her eyes, "You and Voldemort are not, in any universe, the same. No matter how you may be connected. And if you ever talk like that again so help me..." She shook her head holding her arms to her chest and looked away from Harry.

Harry stared at her, and then looked at Ron, "I—I really didn't mean. Merlin. I'm so sorry. I've never thought Muggles were--. 'Mione I'm sorry. Ron?"

Ron looked away from the two a small ironic smirk on his face, "Annoying isn't it?" Ron asked the suddenly silent space, "How she can just cut through all the barriers and reach the point." He gave a choked chuckle, "Especially when you don't want her to see it."

Harry nodded slowly and looked back at Hermione, "'Mione," Harry opened his arms up and held them out to her, "Please, I don't know...I don't know what came over me. Can you forgive me?"

She glared at him but then slowly walked back over to him and leaned into his embrace. Harry looked at Ron and opened another

arm and smiled weakly.

"C'mon Ron," Harry said, "Don't make it look like I'm the only one who needs it."

Ron rolled his eyes and pushed himself off the wall clapping his two best friends into his own embrace. Hermione moved so that the three of them could hold each other equally.

"Stop leaving me in the dark," Hermione said, "I'm tired of being left behind."

"You were never behind," Harry said softly.

Ron rolled his eyes, "Yeah and if you were you'd just elbow you're way through to us."

Hermione lightly hit the back of Ron's head and smiled, "You two..." She shook her head without finishing her sentence.

They stayed like that for a while until Madam Pomfrey kicked the other two out. Harry laid back down. He still felt it, that slime that had entered his soul on contract with Voldemort's but...He looked at the door where Hermione and Ron had exited, and he slowly fell asleep.

For a long Time I was worried about doing this too early...But there are some things in the plot line that simply have to be addressed sooner rather than later. Especially because Harry got to school so late. The knot had all ready been unraveling for a while so I decided to have it snap earlier then i had origionaly planned. This will give the story a darker edge in the long run of course as Harry has to deal with the consequences and that little thing he had lost? Well, considering it was litterally split in two this will have new complications with the connection between him and Voldemort. I hope you enjoyed it. The story moves on much quicker from hear on out.

Constructive criticism always welcome.

-Red

Walking Dangerously

With head bandaged and an enormous yawn Harry walked leisurely out of the Headmasters office the next day. He was still dizzy, so much so that he felt he must look like some sort of drunk cruising down the corridors with how beautifully his woozy sight hindered his walking abilities. Not that there had been much ability there beforehand. Still the weird gazes he kept getting and the fact that people were distinctly avoiding him in the hallways made him edgy. All he wanted to do was have a lie-down in his four-poster bed in the Gryffindor dormitory.

He would have been on his way there had a rough hand not grabbed him by the arm and pulled him around. The world spun and the bright colors of magic drowned out the mundane images of the physical realm. Harry heard himself go "Oooo..." as he was turned unwillingly. A warm arm plopped across Harry's shoulder as a grinning Ron sidled up to him. Harry allowed himself to stumble and he gave a dramatic 'oof'.

"Have a little too much butter beer there mate?" Ron grinned.

"Ha ha." Harry deadpanned, "I'm dizzy, leave me alone."

Hermione frowned, "You're still dizzy?" She asked coming up to his other side.

"Yeah," Harry stated, "S'posed to be for a couple more days."

"But they didn't find any more damage?" Hermione pressed.

"No mother," It was Harry's turn to roll his eyes, "I'm supposed to take off the bandage after I get back to the room."

Hermione nodded satisfied.

"So what happened?" Ron asked, "The whole school is talking about how you almost blew up."

"Well," Harry sighed, "First: I did 'blow up'. Second: I'll tell you guys when we are certain we can't be overheard ok? Now can I go to my room so I can sleep before first period? My head is killing me."

Hermione and Ron nodded, "Sure you can." Hermione said agreeably.

Harry stopped walking causing the other two to stop walking.

He stared at them, "Wait," He said narrowing his eyes, "what have you two planned?"

Hermione and Ron looked at each other far too innocently for Harry's comfort.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione asked.

"Planned?" Ron grinned rolling his eyes, "You're seriously paranoid mate."

"And you are way to chipper," Harry countered.

He backed up a step and Hermione and Ron flashed identical angelic smiles.

Harry shook his head and held out a hand, "Oh no. No, no, no, no!"

"No' what?" Hermione asked.

"Don't give me that," Harry frowned, "I will not be treated like I need to be chaperoned. Not by you two." He pointed at Ron and Hermione wildly.

"Who said anything about a chaperone?" Hermione asked, "I am going to get food, Ron needed to go back to the dorm for a book he forgot. You just happen to be going back to the dorm to sleep..."

"No 'Mione," Ron interrupted without missing a beat, "Remember you left your book in your dorm too."

"Oh right," Hermione smiled, "Thank you for reminding me."

"No freaking way," Harry glared, "I don't believe either of you."

Hermione and Ron didn't look at each other they just smiled serenely.

"You don't have to Harry," Hermione cooed.

"We're still coming with you regardless." Ron smiled.

Harry twitched.

Hermione gently took the arm that wasn't clutching a cane into the crook of her own arm and began ushering Harry serenely along. Ron walked on Harry's other side watching the other students. When they reached the Gryffindor common room Hermione held Harry's arm tighter as the Gryffindor students in the room froze staring at the three of them.

"May we help you?" Ron asked glaring at some of the nearer students.

Neville was pushed forward toward the trio unwittingly. He looked at them nervously then back at his fellow house-mates. A girl, the one who had pushed him beckoned him forward impatiently.

"Uh—hi guys..." He looked once at Harry, gulped and looked at Hermione, "We uh—we heard about the Astronomy tower..."

Hermione let go of Harry feeling him straighten. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and watched as he raised a single skeptical eyebrow..

"What did you hear?" Harry asked placing his cane in front of him casually and placing both hands on the top.

"Um..." Neville looked behind him at the girl who'd pushed him forward, she began dramatically mouthing silent words at him.

Harry caulked his head trying to interpret her wild soundless talk, "He threw you? Blow? Mow? What are you trying to say?" He asked the girl.

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Ginny brushed into the common room from behind Harry, "They want to know if you blew up."

She didn't look at any of the three standing in the entryway as she systematically found a table and plopped into it while pulling out her homework. Fred came in seconds after but he paused and placed an arm around Harry's unstable shoulders causing the scarred boy to stumble into Fred's side.

Fred grinned at Harry, "They also want to know if you're going to blow up again anytime soon and wonder if you're hazardous to their health."

"Ah," Harry nodded, "Yes. That."

The occupants of the room muttered angrily to each other at Fred and Ginny's bluntness. Harry held up a pacifying hand and those nearest him jumped.

He raised both eyebrows, "Ok," He whistled, "A bit jumpy are we?" He sighed, "

No, I will not be blowing up again like that any time soon. You're safe."

"How do we know that?" One boy asked.

"Because I don't like doing it," Harry answered, "It bloody hurts."

"Here's a question," Ginny stated rolling her eyes as she glanced at the trio in the front of the room, "If Harry 'blew up' as everyone says...how in Merlin's name is he still standing here?"

Harry opened his mouth, shut it, and then lowered his eyebrows contemplatively, "Huh." He said, "Never thought of it that way." He crossed his arms and leaned back against the portrait hole looking at the top of his cane which now stood on its own in front of him.

Hermione, Ron and everyone else in the room watched as the portrait hole opened and Harry fell backwards with a startled cry. His feet flew into the air and then fell to the ground. Harry looked up at a very confused Colin Creevy whose young be freckled face lit up upon seeing his hero on the floor between his feet.

Harry smiled ironically, "Hello Colin." He greeted.

"Harry!" He exclaimed clutching his camera, "Everyone is saying you Blew Up!"

Silence met his words as the tension in the Gryffindor common room felt taught, oppressive. Hermione and Ron smirked and then slowly they began to smile. A few chuckles edged passed the stunned faces of some of the students slowly getting louder. Hermione and Ron burst out laughing heralding an uproar in the room as those who were holding it in let their amusement out. Harry sighed recognizing the broken ice for what it was and looked up at the confused Creevy.

"Colin," Harry asked with a sigh, "Could you help me up?"

"Uh," Colin stammered, "Yeah."

He bent over taking Harry's hand and helped the older boy stand. Harry clutched Colin's shoulder and walked through the portrait hole to where he'd left his cane standing.

"So..." Colin asked confused as they entered the laughing room, "You didn't blow up?"

Harry sighed as his friends went through another fit of laughter at Colin's words, "Yes Colin," Harry said exasperated, "I blew up." And as Colin opened his mouth to ask another question Harry help up a hand and said, "And no, I'm not doing it again."

Colin's disappointment at such left even Harry cracking a smile as the room's mirth escalated again.

And thus to Harry's sorrow he did not get to rest before first period. Instead he was victim to question after question that made his all ready pounding headache, pound harder. So it was he followed half his classmates to the fourth floor to engage in an exciting new lesson by Professor Umbridge without a nap.

As they neared her classroom the mirth of earlier grew steadily somber. Hermione walked beside Harry with a dark expression. Ron had stayed behind in the Common Room stating he was exempt from the class. Harry watched the other students with mixed curiosity wondering what about this woman made each of them scowl as though viewing something frighteningly unpleasant.

They waited outside the classroom in a solemn line and Harry leaned his throbbing head back against the cool stone wall as they waited. The door to the classroom opened in silent invitation. A few of the students jumped and then quickly filed in. Harry raised an eyebrow and looked at Hermione. She shook her head in a silent, 'not now'

and entered the classroom.

Harry entered after her and nearly choked. The room was covered with frills and lace. The pink walls that peaked out from beneath a multitude of cat pictures looked frighteningly similar to puke after eating cotton candy. There was a musty smell coming from the cat portraits, a smell that reminded Harry of his summers with the old woman across the street that used to take care of him. And then there she was, a plump little woman wearing a more ghastly pink than the walls that surrounded her and an equally ghastly bow. Her toad like face was stretched in a sickening smile that looked all to like a grimace.

The other students sat down in unison putting their precious wands away and opening their books. Harry did as they did sitting next to Hermione warily. Professor Umbridge watched Harry with a silent smile on her face and the same hungry expression she wore once before when he'd first met her in the great hall. It gave him the creeps.

"Good Afternoon," Professor Umbridge began.

"Good afternoon Professor Umbridge," The class chanted in unison.

Nobody said a word. No one moved. Harry sat still as a stone with the other students waiting. Professor Umbridge walked down the aisles, her shoes clacked against the ground as she inspected her students.

She paused at Harry and grinned darkly at him, "Good Afternoon Mr. Potter," She said regally, "Welcome back." Harry felt anything but welcome.

"Good Afternoon Professor," Harry said carefully taking his cue from earlier, "Thanks."

"Not 'thanks', Mr. Potter," Umbridge corrected, "Thank you." She commanded.

"Thanks," Harry nodded agreeably, his face utterly serious.

"Three points from Gryffindor for your cheek Mr. Potter," Madam Umbridge said quietly a dangerous smile on her lips.

She ignored Hermione when she reached her.

"Take out your homework," Madam Umbridge stated, her high pitched voice floating across the silent smelly room, "And place it on my desk please."

The students around Harry did as they were bid. Harry stayed where he was seated. Her eyes never left Harry. He in turn narrowed his eyes in question. When the whole class had turned in their work and were seated she picked up the pile of parchment and slowly thumbed through them.

"Hmmm?" She asked the class at large, "It seems I am missing a paper." She looked at Harry again with those large watery eyes, "Mr. Potter," She addressed, "Where is your response to chapter five?"

Several incredulous looks were shot to Professor Umbridge, Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I should have known she was going to pull this," Hermione hissed beside him.

"I would appreciate it if Ms. Granger didn't speak." Madam Umbridge said without looking at Hermione, "Mr. Potter? An explanation please?"

Harry looked at the seething Hermione and the incredulous faces of his peers then addressed Professor Umbridge carefully, "I apologize

Professor," He said politely, "I was not aware that I had to do homework. This is, after all, my first day in your classroom."

"Yes," Madam Umbridge smiled, "But with a clever friend like Ms. Granger surely you should be better prepared?"

"Harry, you don't have to say anything," Hermione didn't even pretend to whisper as she glared at Professor Umbridge.

"I don't expect my friends to do my work for me," Harry stated the hairs on the back of his neck rising.

"Be that as it may," Professor Umbridge said, "Just because you were gallivanting around the countryside all year gives no excuse for late homework. I expect every piece of missing homework to be turned in to me at our next meeting."

"Gallivanting?" Harry asked incredulously his head was throbbing; he had no patience for games, "Is that what you think I've been doing? Do I look like I've been running around having fun?" He spat the word out, "I've been on the run from terrors that should have killed me!" He snapped, "Terrors you should be teaching your class how to defend themselves against not turning in papers on rubbish that can't help them!"

"Are you telling me how to teach my class Mr. Potter?" She asked quietly.

"I'm telling you, madam that this theory rubbish?" He threw the book in front of him onto his desk, "Is well and good for knowledge's sake, but there is nothing in here that helps a young wizard know the spells! How are they supposed to defend themselves?"

"And what," Dolores Umbridge laughed, "In my class room, do they need to defend themselves from?"

Harry slammed his hands on his desk jumping to his feet, "What indeed?" He drawled angrily, "Are you not a wizard?" He asked, "I know a child abuser when I see one madam, ("How dare—!"), and," He said raising his voice, "I have also personally seen the darkest side of the Wizard mind! Do not tell me these spells will not be used! Do not tell me they are useless! Defensive spells saved my bleeding life! How dare you deny your students the knowledge to protect themselves!"

"Insolent child!" Madam Umbridge screeched, "Sit down! Mr. Potter, sit down!"

"I will not!" Harry snapped, "You have called me a liar since the day I came back to this castle. You have refused the truth even as it stared you in the face," He pointed at his face in emphasis, "You deny the students right to their own protection and you abuse those who stand up to you!"

"Where is your proof?" Umbridge snarled, "You are giving heavy accusations to a Ministry official young man. You'd better prove what you are saying or else you'll—."

"Or else?" Harry asked incredulously, "I'm not blind! Look around this classroom! I see bandages on the hands of half of this class! I have seen the scars on my best friend's skin! The Cruciatus curse is forbidden to all, even those within the Ministry."

Hermione snapped a warning hiss at Harry, "Ron won't thank you," She growled.

He ignored her warning his anger past the point of calming down.

"How dare you accuse me of using an illegal curse on a student!" Madam Umbridge screeched, "I will drag your insolent little body to the minister you brat!"

"Really?" Harry yelled standing up fully, "I'd love to see you try!"

"Don't bait her!" Hermione snapped.

"You don't think there are worse beings out there professor?" Harry asked angrily, "You don't think I've had my fair share of dark wizards trying to drag me before a more powerful force?" He grabbed the edges of his cloak, all the lamps in the room flickered, "I've had enough of people trying to take advantage of me and those weaker than I! You want to see what true pain looks like?" He asked angrily, "What Voldemort does to those he fears? Then here!" He pulled his hands apart snapping his arms outward to both sides spreading them like wings.

His cloak and vest turned to black smoke dissipating into the air as though blown away by a powerful wind. Gasps filled the room and desks pushed themselves away from Harry as he breathed heavily his golden eye glowing angrily. The students stared at his skin not able to tell where the scars began and where they stopped. One kid got up and ran out of the room retching. It was not hard to imagine what he'd been through with such an intricate visual.

Harry watched Umbridge and the woman backed up a step unable to tear her gaze from his dual colored eyes. A darkness lurked beneath those eyes one that promised the whisper of ghosts at the edge of her ears and an endless pit of despair.

Hermione stood slamming her book onto her desk breaking the spell that had fallen over the classroom, "Thanks so much Harry," She said angrily with unshed tears in her eyes.

She grabbed her things and swept out of the classroom at nearly a trot. Harry let his arms fall turning to watch her go. The smoke that had been his cloak and vest wrapped itself around him and resumed its physical form. He grabbed his things, leaving Umbridge's assigned book on the desk with contempt. He snatched his cane up

and the power that had seemed to swirl around him diminished as he hobbled after his sister. As he closed the door he heard Madam Umbridge try to bring order to her classroom as everyone began talking at once.

Hermione sat, several corridors away in a windowsill looking out onto the castle grounds. She hugged her books to her chest seething and shaking.

"What the hell was that?" She snapped at Harry when he approached.

"You saw it she was--!" Harry began.

"What I saw--," Hermione cut off, "Was you making an enemy of the Ministry! Which is something you can't afford! Are you daft Harry?" She shook as she glared at him, "Is it fun for you to show off your scars and remind those of us who had seen it about the terrible pain you went through?"

Harry took a step forward and stopped, "Fun?" He asked incredulously, "That woman hurt Ron--!"

"And you think he'd thank you for 'boldly' defending him!" Hermione scoffed, "This is not about you!" She snapped, "By riling her up you've made her worse for the rest of us! No one will thank you for standing up to her and calling her out for what she is!"

"I couldn't sit and let her pick on me Hermione!" Harry snapped.

"Yes!" Hermione snapped back, "Yes you could! Ron did it for months! Worse, he let her hurt him! Not that he should have let that happen, but Harry, it was her classroom. Humiliating her in her classroom is only going to make her go at you more!"

"So what?" Harry said, "Let her try!"

"No Harry!" Hermione cried, "Public displays against her are public displays against the Ministry! Don't you have enough enemies to worry about without the Ministry breathing down your neck?"

"I can handle it," Harry growled.

"No you can't!" Hermione cried exasperated, "They won't go after you! They'll go after me and Ron and Ron's Parents! Don't you see? You're a catalyst! Whenever you're in trouble, so are we!"

"Well I'm sorry for giving you trouble," Harry snapped hurt, "I never asked for you to follow me and be my friend! I'm sorry I've placed such a burden on you and Ron."

Hermione looked as if she'd been slapped, "Harry I didn't mean that," She said shaking, "You know I didn't mean that."

"Didn't you?" Harry asked angrily, "Well I'm sorry but I'm not going to back down from what I believe in. Not now, not ever. I'm sorry I survived the summer."

Hermione stood with shocked and hurt eyes. Harry glared at her standing tall in front of her without a speck of pity. She slowly turned and walked fast away from him tears streaming down her cheeks as she went. He watched her go a sense of powerful triumph overwhelming his senses. A slow sinister smile graced his lips just as he realized what he was feeling.

Harry staggered pulling himself out of the spell he'd fallen under. What just happened...? Oh Merlin...

He snapped a hand to his mouth and stumbled backward until his rump hit the windowsill. He slumped against it in silent shock. He never meant to say those things. He didn't enjoy hurting Hermione, not in the least. He wanted to throw up.

Harry clutched his stomach closing his eyes painfully. What had come over him? At first he was simply defending himself, but the more she argued the more he'd wanted to rip that self righteous mouth off of her face...He turned pushing the window open in frantic haste as he retched. That wasn't him. Those thoughts weren't Harry's. He felt sick, tainted, and evil. The bile that cast a yellow sheen on the grass below winked up at him, mocking him. Harry pushed himself away from the window forgetting his cane he stumbled then fell hard and laid there without any will to rise.

His chest rose and fell slowly as he went over his argument with Hermione again and again. He gasped as a sob tried to break through his chest. His tears were there, on his cheeks but he wouldn't allow them to fall any further. Crying wasn't going to undo the hurt he'd done.

He looked at his cane. It still stood serenely by the window without anything holding it up. The sun glinted off the ruby top and it sparkled angrily at Harry as though reprimanding him. He looked morosely at it then ashamed he looked away. The warm ivory shaft fell into his hand and he looked at the cane with a tired smile. If an inanimate object was willing to forgive him...He used the cane to help push himself to his feet. He needed to talk to someone. He needed to understand what had just come over him. So he hobbled slowly out of the corridor toward the Headmaster's office.

Figure this out first, He ordered himself, Then find Hermione and make amends.

The trip to the Headmaster's office was completely uneventful but for the fact that he met Madam Sinistra in the hallway. She strode toward him, her cloak billowing around her like an angry black cloud. Her stormy eyes were fixed upon him with such dark focus as to make any boy in his shoes tremble upon looking at them.

Harry should have been afraid, and he was, but he was too scared of himself in that moment to worry about his angry Mistress.

So he gave her a cheeky smile as she descended upon him and said relieved, "Oh good, you're here. Saves me the trip to your classroom."

"I should string you up by your ears," She growled when she reached him grabbing his shoulder, "Why aren't you in class? No, don't tell me." She shook her head, "I just had a lovely talk with Dolores Umbridge." Her hand tightened on his shoulder.

"Yeah," Harry sighed dropping his happy façade, "After I talk to Dumbledore."

Madam Sinistra scrutinized her pupil narrowing her eyes, "Your pale," She stated, "And sweating. What did you do this time?"

"Nothing," He winced, "Well, you know what I did but that's not why I'm pale...Please Sinistra, I need to talk to the Headmaster."

She raised an eyebrow and nodded steering him toward the Headmaster's office, "We'll talk about your performance in Dolores's classroom after," She concluded.

Harry nodded relieved. Madam Sinistra watched her pupil with careful interest. His head bandage was gone, the injury he sustained yesterday healed nicely. But he was pale, and his limp seemed worse than it had yesterday. He was also quiet. This had become strange for him. He rarely allowed the opportunity to crack some smart aleck remark up at her, unless something bothered him. She was relieved when they reached the Guardian Gargoyle and she uttered the password.

When they reached the top of the stairs the Headmaster was already ready at the door, "Harry?" He asked surprised, "I thought you'd be in the infirmary."

Harry shook his head gravely, "No sir," He said, "I need you to look in my head again. Please." He looked at the Headmaster and Madam Sinistra finally realized what it was that was bothering her pupil.

"Harry," She said carefully, "Your scared aren't you?"

Harry jumped a little startled and then smiled tiredly, "Yeah," He said, "I did something today...hurt one of my friends. And I—enjoyed it." He shuddered.

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up into his skull, "All right," he said agreeably, "Let's have a look at what's happening in your head then shall we?"

Harry nodded relieved. He sat down in a chair and Dumbledore conjured a chair for himself to be placed in front of Harry. He placed his hands on the boy's knees and stared unblinkingly into Harry's eyes. A surge of hatred so great that it had Harry wrench himself from the headmaster in alarm cut through Harry's unsuspecting thoughts. He looked away from his mentor gasping in pain as his head throbbed terribly.

Dumbledore's eyebrows narrowed in confusion and worry, "Harry?" He asked carefully, "Are you all right"

"No!" Harry gasped feeling tears of fear and frustration build in his eyes the second time that day, "I'm not! I thought I was but ever since yesterday I've been having weird thoughts, weird emotions riding over my own, overtaking them! They aren't mine! They're his they have to be! I don't want this! I just want my thoughts to be my own! Harry's thoughts! Not Voldemorts! I hurt Hermione!" He looked up at Dumbledore pleading, "Isn't there something we can do?" He asked, "Please, I don't know where I am and where he begins right now." He buried his head in his hands, "I'm scared."

Dumbledore sighed running a hand over his wizened face he leaned back in his chair steepling his fingers in front of him, "You can come in Ms. Granger, Mr. Weasley." He said quietly.

Harry stiffened his eyes widening and then he tried to fold himself up into the back of the chair so he wouldn't be seen. He buried his head into his hands feeling like a child but he felt them, both of their auras shimmered at him through his own. He felt their anger. Ron's was simmering beneath his skin, but he was reigning it in. Hermione, too was angry, but there was also worry and sorrow in her aura. Harry's protective nature for his friends over-ruled his fear of their wrath and slowly he looked up at them. Hermione's eyes were puffy and red from crying, Ron looked at him with a closed expression, his emotions otherwise unreadable but for his aura.

"I'm sorry—," Harry began.

Ron held up a hand cutting him off and shook his head clenching his teeth, "Not now," Ron said coldly.

Harry looked at the floor ashamed.

"I take it the two of you heard what we were trying to discuss?" Madam Sinistra intoned leaning on the Headmaster's desk.

They nodded.

"Well then, I suppose you two had better stay while we figure this out," She sighed, "We obviously can't do one thing without the other two in tandem anymore."

Dumbledore chuckled, "We wouldn't have been able to anyway if they hadn't been separated by distance for the past two months. I suppose we should simply be grateful that their magic doesn't act as closely as they do."

"Hermione I'm--," Harry tried again.

Hermione shook her head, "Your words hurt Harry," She said honestly, "But your actions hurt more. You need to be aware that your bark, has a bite to it. I'm angry, yes, but we can apologize after we figure out what's in your head. I know you. I guess I know you wouldn't have gone as far as you had."

Harry nodded morosely then looked at Dumbledore with a weak smile, "So," He said, "Can we try again?"

Dumbledore nodded and looked into Harry's eyes. Harry was relieved to find no overwhelming hatred coursing through him for no reason as Dumbledore uttered 'Legillimens' and entered Harry's mind. The room became silent as the two in the chair were engrossed. The three outside watching found comfortable spots and sat down to wait.

Whirling and clicking noises surrounded the silence as all of the small strange implements that were Dumbledore's trinkets continued to wink and dance in the dim light of the office. Fawkes wasn't even currently on his perch beside the desk without his soothing croon the silent room felt emptied.

Madam Sinistra watched Harry's friends. Despite their obvious anger toward him they watched Dumbledore and Harry like a pair of overly protective siblings. They looked after each other. She hadn't really seen them all together seeing as how she'd met Harry after the school semester had begun. Watching the three interact now was informative.

Dumbledore sighed and fell back into his chair, "Well, my boy, it seems we need to teach you how to sort through your mind."

"I know how to do that," Harry said.

"Not this way." Dumbledore stated, "We need to find out exactly what is yours and what is Voldemort's. Then we need to separate the two things, section them out and place a wall between them."

"Think carefully about this," Madam Sinistra said quietly, "Doing this could be damaging to your mind. And if any cracks are left between what is you and what is him...you could end up sporting two separate personalities that will constantly be battling for control."

Harry thought about this for a moment his eyebrows pulled together in a frown, "Are there no other options?" He asked carefully not liking the thought of being out of control of his own mind if even for a small second.

"We could, after we've separated what is yours and what isn't," Madam Sinistra began carefully, "Merge the two minds with a small barrier. It's more natural, and it allows you to see his memories as his and your memories as yours. There shouldn't be any spillage of emotion. You'll just know what's yours and you'll have the added bonus of understanding your enemy better."

Dumbledore nodded sagely, "It is of course, more difficult to do that."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because there is a modicum of acceptance that goes along with this," Dumbledore said quietly, "You have to be willing to accept that these pieces of another man's life are now a part of you, and that just because he is a part of you...you are not him." He steepled his fingers before his face and peered at Harry over his spectacles, "This is not by any means an easy thing for anyone your age to grasp and completely understand. Acceptance is a hard thing to do even for the best of us."

Harry thought about that looking at the floor. To accept that any part of Voldemort was a part of him...that the taint inside him now was

truly his...? He shuddered feeling nauseous.

"I would not have suggested it if I did not believe you were capable Harry," Madam Sinistra said quietly, "This is not a light decision and it is also one that should not be decided rashly or emotionally. You need to think about it carefully. And in the mean time you should think carefully on everything you feel, speak, or think while you decide."

"Now I believe the three of you have more to talk about," Dumbledore stated quietly, "We must let you do that. Things left unsaid fester and get worse. Children should solve their problems together in order to become better adults."

Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione, neither looked at him, but the fact that they were there was enough. Harry took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly standing up as his friends did so that he could follow them out of the office. They left Dumbledore and Madam Sinistra talking quietly.

It was long minutes and after reaching the fresh open air outside when anyone decided to speak. It was Ron who spoke to the surprise of his companions. His voice played softly, dangerously over the fields. There was a resigned quality to it, the anger simmered beneath, but was not overwhelming enough to vocalize.

"I'm not going to thank you for what you did today," He began somberly, "To be frank, when Hermione told me what you'd done in the Toads classroom it pissed me off. And I'll tell you why." He took a deep breath steeling himself for what he was about to say, "Remember I told you I wasn't ashamed of allowing that woman to do to me what she did?"

Harry nodded carefully keeping himself quiet and clamping down any emotions he may or may not have in order to listen more clearly.

"Do you know why?" Ron asked rhetorically, "Because I did, and I

allowed her to torture me because by taking out her need to abuse someone on me...she didn't take it out on the other students."

"What?" Harry asked shocked.

"She sick," Ron spat, "Evil, but she had some weird obsession with me. So I let her hurt me. I let her..." He shuddered, "Do unforgivable things to me because as long as she had me, she left the others alone."

"Are you crazy?" Harry asked suddenly angry, "Ron, she only needs an excuse, she wasn't going to stop just because she had you!"

"She did though," Ron snapped defensively, "For a while." He looked away, "She began hurting the other kids again, I kept going to her 'detentions' in the hopes that she would stop. But it got to the point where I began to wonder...was anything I was doing right? What was the point of me being tortured, being forced to torture myself for her sick amusement if...if it didn't do any good." Ron sat down next to a tree heavily.

Harry and Hermione followed suit quietly.

"So yeah, I was mad at you," Ron said, "Not because you called her out for what she was, but because by provoking her, some other kid that thinks like I did has to suffer."

"I'm sorry for that," Harry said quietly, "But what she's doing is wrong. I won't allow myself to be pushed around by her. I've had my fare share of abuse in my life and I'm bloody sick of it."

Ron grinned sadly at him, "I kind of figured," He said quietly, "You have...a hell of a lot of shit to deal with too."

Harry shook his head, "Please don't," He said quietly, "Don't understand. I never wished any of this to happen. You should have

been safe here. I don't want you to understand what it feels like."

"Too late," Ron said, "But you know what? It's made me realize something about myself. I'm bloody sick of being pushed around too."

"Then stand up to her." Harry urged.

"I don't know if I can," Ron admitted.

Harry had nothing to say to that. Could he ever go back to the Dursleys and confront them for all the wrong they'd put him through? Did he have the courage to do something like that knowing that if he did it wouldn't change anything?

"I'm sorry too," Hermione said quietly, "I shouldn't have reacted the way I had today but Harry," She looked at him with large brown eyes and a quivering lip, "You were scary today. Watching you in that classroom was like watching another person. You looked ready to kill that woman. And I knew, somehow, that you could."

Harry sighed, "I don't know what came over me in the hallway Hermione," His breath shuddered, "I threw up after you left, did you know that?"

Hermione shook her head.

"I threw up when I realized I was just saying things to make you cry...and I was enjoying it." His hands shook as they clutched his cane, "I was hurting you and it felt so good that I wanted to hurt you in other ways to." Tears streaked his cheeks as he admitted that one truth he'd refused even to admit to himself, "I'm scared of me too," He said looked at his alarmed friends, "Terrified even," He brought a shaky hand to his face unable to look at them, "If I accept what's happening...do I also accept the thought that I can turn on you, either of you at any moment?" Harry shook his head, "I don't think I could

do that."

Hesitantly Hermione reached out to grasp the trembling hand Harry held in front of his face. She slowly pulled it down to look into Harry's eyes. Once again she marveled at the glinting dual colors that looked back at her and saw his fear.

"If I know anything about you it's this," Hermione said quietly, "you'd no sooner take a knife to yourself let alone purposefully hurt me or Ron and enjoy it. No matter what influences your mind. I," She closed her eyes and then opened them determination making their dark brown color hard, "Forgive you." She said finally, "and if you want me to, I will help you sort out your mind and accept yourself in any way that I can."

"Me too mate," Ron said smiling quietly, "But if you make Hermione cry again like you did today I'm going to sock you."

Harry grinned tiredly at Ron, "If I make her cry again like today I'll welcome the abuse," He said honestly taking Hermione's hand in his own he squeezed it, "Thank you." He said honestly.

"You're welcome," Hermione said and glared at her boys, "Just don't make a habit of this ok?"

They nodded solemnly at Hermione. The three lapsed into silence sitting against the tree feeling both heavy but lighter then they had. All the secrets had been laid out on the grass leaving the three whole again with a renewed understanding between them. They'd changed, each one of them, but they had decided to stay together regardless.

This chapter took longer then I'd wanted it to, the reason being I had to re-write it because I left too many things out that needed to be addressed. so now they have been addressed, now I can continue with the story, and hopefully the next chapter will be out sooner then

this one. Thanks for reading. Constructive criticism welcome.

-Red

Textbooks and Newspapers

Harry stretched languidly on one of the couches in the Gryffindor common room then plopped his head onto the table in front of him with a great sigh.

"Does Madam Sinistra always give you guys this much homework?" Harry asked into his text book.

Hermione looked up from her homework and glanced at the top of Harry's head situated on the table in front of her, "Generally yes." Hermione replied, "I'm surprised you are in her class at all actually. Didn't you used to have divination at the same time?"

"Didn't wanna," Harry mumbled, "She bullied me into it."

"Bullied you into what?" Hermione asked.

"Runes, Arithmacy, Magical theory..." He looked up resting his chin on the top of his books, "She made me take almost as many classes as you 'Mione!"

Ron snickered beside Harry, "I predict Harry will die from a heart attack induced by overly high stress levels at this semester's end." He recited from his predictions book with a grin, "Well, that's it for Divination homework! I'm done then!" He snapped his book shut and smirked at Harry while Harry glared, "Too bad you dropped the class mate," Ron chided, "Divination is by far the easiest bull shit class in the school."

"I hate you," Harry glared, "You and your stupid easy homework."

Ron laughed.

"Stop whining," Hermione snapped, "I'm trying to concentrate."

Harry sighed and buried his head in his paper closing his eyes and trying to ignore the massive headache that simply would not go away. He knew why. It was the same reason he'd been having weird dreams with a strange door for the past three nights since the day he'd 'blown up' in the astronomy tower. It was also the reason his mood swings, which had been decidedly wild before, were now completely out of control. He turned his mind away thinking again about the decision he'd have to make to stop it all. It was making concentrating on homework he desperately needed to catch up on difficult.

"Harry! Harry!" Colin Creevy ran through the portrait hole waving a news paper above his head as he bee-lined toward the trio, "It's awful! You need to read this!"

Harry lifted his head wishing the kid wouldn't shout and plucked the paper out of his eager hands. He only had to take one look at the front page to groan and lay his head back down on his text.

"Well," He muttered into his book, "It was bound to happen sooner or later."

Ron grabbed the news paper from Harry's lethargic fingers and whistled, "It could be better mate, I won't lie."

Hermione glared at Ron and snatch the paper from him. She stiffened.

Underneath a large picture of a sinister looking Harry blasting open the great hall doors read:

Boy Who Lived, Lives: But at what cost?

By Maria Snyder

Blowing open the doors to the Great Hall at Hogwarts School of

Witchcraft and Wizardry a dark figure strolled into the dining hall last Friday evening with a message. Harry Potter has returned as a disfigured, dangerous, wizard who claims that You-Know-Who has returned from the dead. The Minister denies any such notion that You-Know-Who could ever possibly be alive and that the child has suffered innumerable horrors by unnamed Wizards over the summer.

"We regret what has happened to the boy, sincerely," Said Minister Fudge last evening at a press conference, "His trials during his disappearance have twisted his mind, and changed him. He has become a danger to the community and to the school in which he now resides."

When asked what Our Esteemed Minister meant by 'danger' he explained.

"The boy is unstable. He blew up the Astronomy tower and nearly killed a student. His magic is out of control. That child is a time bomb waiting to happen."

When asked what the Minister was prepared to do about the "dangerous child he said...

Hermione put the paper down and stared at Harry not having the will to read anymore, "How did they learn about the Astronomy tower?" She asked.

"Oh you know," Harry shrugged, "It's all over the school. Kids talk to their parents, parents talk to friends, Fudge talks to the press..."

"But Harry," Hermione glared, "There's a photograph of the tower after you're 'explosion'."

Harry looked up, "There is?" He asked interestedly.

He took the paper from Hermione and flipped over to the second

page raising an eyebrow, "So there is," He said impressed.

"Harry," Hermione said, "This isn't funny. They're calling you deranged. Saying you've been traumatized into believing Voldemort is alive. They're calling you dangerous, dark...why are you grinning?"

"I'm laughing because it's the same bull shit they've been writing about me for years." Harry sighed, "Do you remember last year at all?" He asked, "I'll be avoiding any and all meals in the great hall if that's ok with you."

"If the Board of directors decide you're too dangerous to be kept at school you'll be expelled!" Hermione cried, "Aren't you in the least bit worried?"

"Nope," Harry said, "Madam Sinistra is going to 'bind' my magic to hers as a precaution."

"Bind?" Hermione asked alarmed, "Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "We talked about it."

"And your ok with it?" Hermione pressed.

"Not entirely no," Harry admitted, "But Madam Sinistra promised to give me a failsafe, something that will allow me to break away from her if absolutely needed. That and the only thing that's going to be different is that I will be her official apprentice in title only."

"Hate to break it to you mate," Ron said, "But that's not the only change, you may have to spend more time with her too."

"I don't mind that," Harry said honestly, "She's a pretty interesting woman once you get to know her. Her humor might be a bit scary...but other than that I learn a lot from her. Besides, the bind might help dampen the...other stuff I need to deal with."

Ron nodded with a wise face as he crossed his arms. Harry hit his shoulder with a grin.

"What about the other students?" Hermione asked unsatisfied.

"What about them?" Harry asked, "They've been treating me like I was going to explode since the day I got back. That hasn't changed since last year. Only now their gossip has turned to fear. I almost like that better because then they'll leave me alone."

"You don't mean that," Hermione frowned.

"No?" Harry asked then shrugged, "I suppose not. All I'm saying is that I think I'd be perturbed if they all suddenly started to like me and worship me. It would be just like Snape and Malfoy had always accused me of trying to do. Better to look the martyr than the celebrity. I don't ask for the attention, in fact I'd be happier without it."

Ron smiled quietly and shook his head.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Just happy to know that some things never change mate," Ron explained, "It's good to know that even after everything, you're still Harry." He looked around the room wistfully, "It kind of gives me hope."

Harry smiled understanding, "You will change Ron," Harry warned quietly, "I have changed, but I'm still me, and at the end of it all, you will still be you."

Ron nodded and looked away. Harry let him keep his silence. Healing was still new to Ron. He was changing, all ready had since Harry had been gone. But Ron was still Ron. Just as Harry was still Harry and hated public attention. Hermione sniffed a little beside

Harry but when he looked at her in askance she shook her head and grinned.

"I suppose this doesn't really matter." She said tossing the paper onto the table.

"Hey wait," Harry grabbed the paper before it fell off, "I want to read more about how 'dangerous' and 'deranged' I am!" He winked at his friends.

Hermione laughed and the three of them bent over to read the paper exclaiming how 'true' some of it was and arguing over how if Harry were evil he would do things differently. To the other students in the room who had been watching Harry carefully the three of them appeared so normal that it was hard to see a deranged lunatic sitting between Ron and Hermione. Even when Harry burst out laughing over one of the editorials stating he belonged in an insane asylum.

True to his word Harry avoided the great Hall and any other place Howlers could reach him. The confused Owls were forced to drop their unwanted parcels outside Harry's window where the howlers could scream at him all they liked but not an ounce of any of them could be heard. Harry took the habit of sitting by his window watching the howlers erupt outside with a small grin on his face as he worked on his homework. He'd clean up the mess after they were done and give the harassed owls treats sending them on their way happily.

The date of the ceremony to bind Harry to madam Sinistra was ever approaching and one letter, which because it was not a howler Harry did take, stated that the Daily Prophet would be watching the ceremony for the betterment of the public's peace of mind. Harry had shrugged writing a reply saying, "Why not". Of course informing his professor he had done so had ended with him piled under twice the amount of homework he normally would have and forced into manual labor in his off hours. Apparently Madam Sinistra disliked the media more than he did.

"Harry Potter," Madam Sinistra growled one evening when she was tutoring him in potions, "What on earth did you do to my desk?"

"You asked me to clean it?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"And all of the papers that had been piled systematically upon it?" Sinistra asked carefully.

"Uh—." Harry fidgeted with his cauldron, "They got...organized?"

Needless to say, Harry never had to worry about manual labor of the cleaning sort for Madam Sinistra again.

Thus dawned the day of the binding. Harry sat in a chair in Madam Sinistra's office looking around at all of the red and black Zen ornaments and exotic paintings in the room. The room's décor was earthy colored tones mixing with the grey stone walls of the castle. It was tempered with warm reds, oranges, golds, browns and greens. The contrasting colors giving the room a relaxed and warm feeling and changed depending upon the season. There was little in the way of clutter. The room was filled with simplicity and clean lines allowing one's mind to always be focused and relaxed.

Harry smiled a little. It reminded him of Sinistra. She may be harsh at times and a bit wooden in demeanor but he knew that was not because she was a cold individual, more that she was always controlled, relaxed. Like the room.

"So where is he?" A ministry official bustled in with a folder filled with paper work.

"Here," Harry answered after he saw his professor walk in.

He carefully looked at the ministry official noticing the pattern and color of his brown magic looking for any convolutions, any...taint.

Finding none he relaxed.

"Bradby," Sinistra smiled kindly, "This is Harry Potter, my apprentice."

Harry stood and offered his hand looking at the man in the eyes with a friendly smile, "Good evening Sir," Harry greeted warmly.

The man stood stunned for a moment, "Good evening Mr. Potter," He said shaking Harry's hand and almost dropping his folder of papers, "I'm Mal Bradby."

Harry quickly helped the man pick up a few papers that had fallen and Mr. Bradby looked surprised again.

"Why, thank you Mr. Potter," He said, "Um—shall we...shall we begin?"

Harry nodded.

"A moment please," A young woman's voice said as a manicured foot wedged itself in the door pushing the ancient wood open, "I hope you weren't going to begin without the Prophet to take down its analysis of tonight's event?"

She walked in with a camera hung over her shoulder and a pad of paper in her hand. Her cat-like eyes watched the three in the room with a mischievous smile. Harry had to look away from her for fear of being impolite. She was beautiful. Her hair was a brown that fell in voluptuous waves framing a heart shaped, pale, face. Her blouse while buttoned up was short sleeved revealing long creamy arms. Her skirt began at her waist and hugged her feminine curves all the way down to her knees. She grinned at Harry with a predators smile and Harry shook himself of her beauty. Damn hormones.

"We wouldn't dream of it," Sinistra smiled darkly.

Harry had to hide a grin as he heard the heavy sarcasm in his professor's voice. She was subtle, a trait Harry hoped to pick up on one day. Harry flinched when a flash went off in his direction. He looked over to see the female reporter smiling innocently at him, her cat eyes anything but.

"You must be Mr. Potter," She purred, "I must say when they told me you had been horribly scared to the point that one almost couldn't recognize you..." She breathed out a whistle, "They weren't kidding were they?" She held out a delicate manicured hand, "I'm Maria Snyder," She smiled.

Harry smiled ironically, "It's a pleasure to meet you madam," Harry said gently taking her hand in his and holding it there, "I enjoyed your article on me."

"You read it!" Ms. Snyder asked surprised and grinned.

"I did," Harry nodded, "You have a few facts off but you're a decent writer for a reporter."

She caulked her head to the side regarding him carefully, "So, you're intelligent."

Harry grinned, "Deranged I may be, but unintelligent I am not."

She laughed the sound falling from her lips like bells. Harry smirked a little and then yelped as a slap to the back of the head had him facing his instructor.

"Less flirting," Madam Sinistra stated, "More focus. Shall we?"

Harry nodded and grinned sheepishly at his professor as he rubbed the spot on his head she had hit.

"So what exactly are we attempting to do here?" Maria Snyder asked

whipping out a ball point pen and her note pad.

"We are not attempting," Madam Sinistra corrected, "We are going to bind Harry's magic to my own making him my official apprentice."

"May I ask why you are binding him?" Maria asked, "Don't you think that's a little extreme? Most apprentices now a day's only need to take an oath proclaiming their own responsibility over what they are taught. Binding is a bit old-fashioned."

"It isn't," Harry said, "Though I don't feel entirely...comfortable over the thought that someone else has a hold over my magic...I see why this is necessary." He didn't look at her.

His back was held straight and his scared face looked tired, older then he indeed was.

Ms. Snyder flashed her camera, "Oh?" she asked, "Why's that?"

Harry looked at her and regret lurked in his eyes while his face became steel determination, "Because I don't want to hurt anyone."

Ms. Snyder stilled, her camera had been poised to shoot but looking into those eerily colored eyes and that scared but determined face made her pause. Her eyes met his and for a moment she felt a power exuding from the boy, a potential for something great. She lowered her camera slowly.

"Great Merlin," She breathed, "You really mean it."

Harry raised both eyebrows and the illusion of a man disappeared to be replaced with the adolescent boy that he was, "Yeah," He said matter of factly, "I do." He said it as a boy would who believed he knew the world better than his elders.

Ms. Snyder lowered her camera and stepped back to lean against

the wall chewing on the tip of her pen in contemplation. The minister wanted her to spin the story as though he'd struggled with this whole proceeding, like a spoiled brat. But in fact the opposite was occurring.

Harry Potter was well mannered, listening silently to Mr. Bradby and his teacher. He talked to them in polite tones, on level with them but still remembering his place as a student. His appearance was...daunting to say the least. It would be so easy to spin the child as an evil Wizard just waiting for a chance to be let out based upon his appearance alone...but any who ever met him would quickly become disillusioned of that spin too quickly. He practically exuded gentleness and intelligence.

Ms. Snyder watched the proceedings trying to find a way to fit the image the minister wanted from her to this broken, yet strong kid. A kid who was deceptively old, yet still just that...a kid.

She began writing. Harry Potter would not be under any obligations to his mistress as is normal for the binding ceremony. They practically had to re-write the spell to give him the freedom Madam Sinistra said was his 'due'. The only stipulation was that he had to pass all of his exams with Outstandings or higher and to make each lesson on time.

He groaned dramatically asking whether or not he had to attend Umbridge's class on time and his professor said, "Yes, unless she really makes you feel the need to leave. You are my apprentice, not hers. But that does not mean you will disrespect her. I will not have her knocking on my door every day to complain about your misbehavior understood?"

Harry nodded rolling his eyes, "Yes, madam." He said with a grin.

She glared at him a little but Ms. Snyder noticed her look was not as stern as it seemed. She brought up her pen to her lips with a small

grin. They were close then. That was something she'd need to make a note on.

"Well then," Mr. Bradby said with a sigh, "I think that is all," He held out a quill, "Now if you would each please prick your fingers with this and place a drop each on this spot," He indicated a spot on the paper that was an empty circle, "And the proceeding will be complete. I should warn you there will be small side effects. If a dream is strange to you it may not be your own but don't be alarmed, that is normal and it rarely happens often."

Harry and Madam Sinitsra nodded and took turns pricking their fingers. Ms. Snyder made it a point to note that neither flinched when they did it.

"That's it?" Harry asked as Mr. Bradby rolled up the parchment and stuck under his arm gathering together the other papers.

"Yes," Mr. Bradby smiled, "That is it."

Harry helped him gather the rest of his papers with a nod of acceptance. At a look from Maria Harry raised an eyebrow and walked over.

"I guess you're not much of a maniac," She sighed dramatically, "Which is unfortunate for me. But if you ever want someone to give you an interview, floo me." She handed a card to him with silver engravings and the name of her office.

"Thanks," Harry said hiding how flattered he felt that a beautiful woman had given him her card.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you," She grinned, "In hopes you do something worth writing about."

Harry grinned back, "Then lets' hope you don't have to."

She laughed again and strolled out of the door at a brisk pace.

Harry felt a tug at his back and turned looking around the room confused. Madam Sinistra, who stood on the other side of the room with her arms crossed raised an eyebrow.

"Was that?" Harry asked pointing at her.

"Yes," Madam Sinistra said with a smile, "I tugged a little on your magic to test it."

Harry smirked, "And to pull my attention away from the reporter."

Madam Sinistra raised an eyebrow but her eyes danced in mirth at having been caught, "That's how I'll call you if I need you so don't be alarmed when it happens."

"Ok," Harry nodded, "Can I go now?" He asked suddenly the eager child once again, "I'm meeting Ron and Hermione on the quidditch pitch before supper."

"Quidditch has been disbanded," Madam Sinistra said with a frown, "What are you--?" At one look from Harry's grinning face she held up a hand and shook her head, "Never mind. I don't want to know. Just don't get into any trouble." She warned as Harry laughed, "What you do now reflects upon me."

Harry saluted her with a grin, "Yes, Ma'am." He proclaimed then strolled out of her office as though his legs weren't indeed crippled.

Madam Sinitsra shook her head as Mr. Bradby watched amused, "He walks pretty quickly with that cane of his," He said, "Um...may I ask...?"

"Yes, Mr. Bradby, you may." Madam Sinistra said sitting down.

"His legs," He fidgeted, "Well really it's all of that...what could do all that to a child?"

"You don't know?" Madam Sinistra asked quietly.

"There've been rumors but the ministry is saying..." Mr. Bradby stammered.

"The Ministry, in this matter, is wrong." Madam Sinistra said quietly.

"I was afraid of that," Mr. Bradby sighed, "It was good to see you again Emily, take care of that kid."

Madam Sinistra smiled, "It was good to see you again too Mal," She amended, "Say hello to Lucile to me will you? The last time we met wasn't under the best of circumstances."

"She knows," He smiled, "She knew before the world did I think. She's been paying close attention to the news. There've been too many coincidences. I never got to thank you before, when you brought us our son back."

"You don't need to." Emily said quietly, "Your son was a casualty of war, and he saved my life. Brining his body to you had been the least I could do."

"Did Dumbledore...?" He hesitated, "Did he reinstate his 'Order'?"

"Yes," Madam Sinistra said, "You should go talk to him while you're here."

Bradby nodded with a sad smile, "I will then." He raised a hand in farewell and was the last to leave Madam Sinistra's office.

Emily Sinistra sighed and leaned back in her chair quietly. She and

Harry had been fortunate the ministry had sent Mal Bradby instead of someone else. She had also been lucky to place the failsafe on the spell before the reporter had arrived. She knew that if word got out that if the situation was dire Harry could simply shake off the bind there would be trouble. But it was necessary for him, and for her. Too many times in the past had a master teacher died rendering the student insane, and one didn't need to die to do that. Severing the bond unexpectedly could have the same results as death. The original spell was too risky and too harmful to the student.

Any other Ministry official under pay of Fudge would have insisted upon the spell being untampered with. On good conscience, Madam Sinistra simply could not do that. Harry didn't know of the risk he'd almost put himself through and Madam Sinistra was glad for it. This way the boy was completely free other than the fact that Madam Sinistra could feel when he was about to lose control and could reign him in.

She smiled and breathed a sigh of relief allowing her shoulders to droop. She would not repeat the past.

Harry met Ron and Hermione on the Quidditch pitch grinning madly, "Great Merlin but she was beautiful!" Harry bragged dramatically sitting down unceremoniously with his friends on the Quidditch Pitch.

"Maria Snyder?" Hermione asked, "The Reporter who wrote that awful piece about you in the Prophet?"

"Yeah," Harry smirked.

"I thought you hated reporters?" Hermione stated disapprovingly.

"I do," Harry stated seriously, "But I wouldn't mind looking at this one. Too bad she's a vulture."

"And too old for you." Hermione rolled her eyes.

Harry and Ron laughed at Hermione, their voices echoing across the empty pitch. Their voices rang across the empty ground. A lone crows call interrupted the peace and silence fell on the damp grounds.

"It's sad here," Harry commented after they'd calmed down, "Like a graveyard."

"Without the corpses," Ron agreed.

Hermione scrunched up her nose in distaste, "Thank you for the visual Ron," She said.

Ron chuckled but stopped when he looked at Harry's haunted eyes, "Well," He said changing the subject, "Shall we begin?"

The other two nodded crossing their legs in front of them in a meditative stance.

"All right," Harry said rolling his shoulders as he began to breathe rhythmically, "Breathe in slowly counting in your mind. Allow your thoughts to simmer up to the surface of your mind. Take each thought, examine it, then let it go..." He spoke softly as his friends counted and breathed.

Slowly he and his friends fell into that meditative state becoming one being with their surroundings. Their thoughts floated in and out of their minds never staying for a second at a time. Slowly Ron and Hermione had the glimmers of a sensation tickling the back of their minds. They were aware of each other, and Harry in a way neither of them could describe. The trio's auras mingled testing out the feel of each other, the feel of the grass and the world around them.

Their wands were steady sticks of heat at their backs resting behind them as Harry had instructed to do. They'd been doing this for a

week and each time they did it Ron and Hermione and Harry felt closer, more at peace with each other as they once had in the hospital room months ago.

Harry was teaching them wandless magic. They all hoped to be relatively proficient at it so that if they were ever caught without their wands they could protect themselves. The trouble was Ron and Hermione had to unlearn all o the easy habits of channeling power through an all ready magical object without thinking about their magic. It was hard for them to call out said power without a focus. Fortunately Harry was a patient teacher. He took them through each step and all of the theory behind it trying to help them understand their own magic before they tried to use it wandlessly.

Harry stiffened and his aura drew away from his friends as his attention fell else ware. Hermione and Ron snapped out of their meditation feeling him leave. A smile was on Hermione's face as she was about to tell Harry she had felt him leave when she noticed the reason his attention had been drawn away. Ron leapt to his feet his wand in his hand faster than Hermione had thought it possible for the boy to move.

"Give it back Malfoy," Ron snarled.

Hermione winced, her sensitivity picking up on the fact that Ron was pissed.

Draco Malfoy and several of his goons stood behind Harry. The Slytherin boy was twirling Harry's cane silently looking at the object contemplatively.

"As strong as he acts surely Potter doesn't need it," The young man snarled, "His legs seemed fine in professor Umbridge's classroom." He grinned.

Harry stayed silent still in a meditative pose. Hermione wasn't fooled

though, a dark frown turned the corner of his lips down on his otherwise peaceful face.

"Well Potter?" Malfoy asked poking Harry's back with his own cane, "Are you going to prove me wrong?"

"No," Harry said quietly, "You know as well as I do that I can't walk without that." His voice was calm a contrast to his clenched hands.

"Back off," Ron snarled pointing his wand at Draco menacingly, "Or I'll make sure you understand just how well Harry can walk."

Hermione looked at Ron startled and then frowned when Malfoy's eyes lit up in challenge.

"Ron please," Harry said quietly opening his eyes to look at his friend, "He's just goading us hoping we'll fight him so he can forget his father's death and the fact that he's now responsible for the entire Malfoy clan."

The cane came down on Harry's back so hard that Hermione herself was across the distance between Harry and Malfoy with her wand pressed angrily against his neck.

"Back off..." She snarled angrily feeling Ron beside her also in front of Harry.

All of Malfoy's goons also had their

Harry grunted as he pushed himself up from where he'd been hit to the ground with his own cane a dark ironic smile gracing his all ready ironic lips. A storm began to build above them, what had been peaceful clouds seconds ago turned to angry shades of grey.

"I pity you Malfoy," Harry said quietly from his place on the ground, "You idolized your father so much you never saw what a pathetic

asshole he was."

Malfoy pushed against Hermione and Ron kicking Harry hard in the back. The crippled boy went sprawling. Hermione yelled angrily grabbing Malfoy's hand and tugging hard. One of his goons grabbed her and she screamed as they pulled her arms back. Ron was struggling with two others his wand laying forgotten on the grass as he punched and kicked desperately. Malfoy repeatedly kicked Harry angrily forgetting he was a Wizard and not a Muggle.

"You're weak Potter!" He yelled, "You know nothing about me and my father! Nothing! You're a mudblood Orphan! You know nothing!"

Harry whipped an arm around his fury past the point of his awareness as his magic wrapped around Malfoy the air leaving the boy's lungs as Harry tightened his hands around the air and pulled. The others froze as Malfoy began to choke on nothing but air falling to the ground his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. A grim smile twisted Harry's face his eyes glowing in angered triumph. Abruptly he felt a tug on his magic and cried out in fury as the magic holding the air away from Malfoy's lungs was drained.

"What is going on here!" Madam Sinistra snapped angrily the wind in the field whipping her robes around her majestic form in a frenzy.

Harry and Malfoy lay crouched on the grass in front of each other both of their faces white. Hermione pulled away from her holders and rushed over to Harry. He pushed her away frantically as Ron kicked his attacker off of him grabbing Harry's cane and his wand then spitting on the ground at his attackers' feet. Malfoy's goons pulled the boy up and away from the trio helping him to shuffle to the opposite side of the pitch. Harry shook under Hermione's fingers as he looked at his Sensei.

A shock of thunder erupted and she glared at each of the students in the field angrily, "My office, all of you. Now."

It took a while for all of the students to comply but they slowly shuffled out of the Quidditch pitch and made the long silent trek up to her office. They all stood shouldering various bruises that had developed after the fight with sullen faces and dark glares. Madam Sinistra got the story slowly and systematically from everyone except Malfoy and Harry. She dismissed the others and then Malfoy each with his or her own special detention until it was only she and her student in her room. She ran a few tired fingers over her face in exasperation. Harry looked at his professor still pale.

"When I told you not to get into trouble I meant it," She sighed, "You were all meditating?"

Harry nodded stiffly.

"Stop that," Madam Sinistra snapped, "I know you have a tongue so speak."

"I need it locked," Harry said, "Now."

"Locked?" Madam Sinistra asked, "What nonsense are you spouting--?"

A tear fell down Harry's swollen cheek and she realized he was shaking.

"Ah," Madam Sinistra sighed and then rubbed her temples.

She waved a hand the room shimmered like light on water before the magic patterns changed and Harry found himself sitting in the alternate space he'd come to train in every day while he'd been at the hospital. Slowly he inhaled allowing the familiar feeling of Sinistra's reality to wash over him and calm him down.

"Well?" She asked, "What are you waiting for? Clear your mind. It's

time we began sorting you out."

"But Dumbledore--?" Harry asked.

Madam Sinistra scowled, "I was getting to that." She snapped then closed her eyes and calmed herself down.

"You're angry," Harry winced.

"Obviously," Madam Sinistra deadpanned, "We bound your magic today. Today Harry. Not last week. Today. I was hoping I wouldn't feel your magic spike so sporadically on the first day of the bind." She sighed, "At least this time you didn't go looking for trouble."

"I never do," Harry grimaced, "Like I say, it finds me."

Madam Sinistra snorted, "I'm beginning to believe it. Stay here. I'm going to go get Dumbledore."

Harry nodded and closed his eyes leaning his head back against what could only be a thin bunch of bamboo with how it bug into his bruised back. Dumbledore came into the space through the rip madam Sinistra made. For a split second nothing in the space looked real. All of it was artificial background like a screen then after madam Sinistra stepped in it was realistic again. Like a glitch in a computer.

"Well," Dumbledore smiled, "Have you made a decision?"

Harry closed his eyes tiredly then opened them looking at his headmaster bleakly, "Yes," Harry said, "I have."

Dumbledore nodded and sat down with Harry madam Sinistra gracefully folded her feet beneath herself and did the same.

"Well then," Dumbledore stated quietly, "Let us begin." He pointed his wand at Harry's eyes and the white fire of his magic poured into

Harry entering his mind. For hours the three of them would be unaware of anything save the memories and feelings of Harry and the remnants of Tom Riddle.

This chapter was a hell of alot easier to write then the last. Hope you enjoy it.

-Red

Breaking Doors

Hermione and Ron found Harry sitting quietly on one of the old windowsills out in the courtyard of the castle watching the rain pour down around him. He held out an arm and the rain fell around it never touching him. He dropped the arm soundlessly the appendage making a heavy thump on the stone sill.

"I didn't want this," Harry spoke softly, "Any of this, but it seems I have no choice. I saw, and felt..." He shuddered, "Hideous things about one human being, pathetic things. And all I can feel for him...is sorrow."

"You've organized your mind then?" Hermione asked quietly, "Sorted yourself out?"

"Yeah," Harry sighed, "I know now what's me, and what's him. I now understand that he...is the product of a society."

Hermione and Ron looked at each other quietly, "How much of him did you get?" Ron asked.

"Enough, but mostly just his childhood," He said, "It's weird to think of him having one. But he did. And it was awful." He chuckled bitterly, "A lot like mine actually, only he decided to hate all Muggles, where I realized that my Aunt and Uncle are...special cases."

"That's what makes you different than him," Hermione sat down next to Harry placing a hand on his upturned knee.

"I know," Harry said quietly, "And I've...accepted that. I don't hate him now." Harry said, "I can't. I wish I could." He looked up at the dark sky the rain mirroring shadowed light in his eyes, "There's ice in those clouds," He said quietly nodding up at the sky, "Winter hides waiting for the right moment to strike."

Hermione and Ron looked at each other feeling chills run down their spine. Hermione rested a hand on Harry's knee feeling the heat of his fire seeping through the fabric of his pants. He was warmer than anyone she knew. She half wondered if it bothered him. He looked at her silently and she also felt his mention of winter had nothing to do with the weather. Ron also placed a hand on Harry's shoulder a silent seneschal next to his best friend and brother.

Hermione felt strange beside them, as though she were a part of something ancient and great. A piece of ice clinked onto the windowsill and slowly melted making Harry's words prophecy and causing the three to tense as they watched it's shape deteriorate on the stone leaving behind a dark circle.

The trio looked at each other and slowly Harry smiled. Ron and Hermione followed suit shakily. Everything was changing.

"If you would kindly lie down Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said briskly, "We can check your progress then you can be on your way."

Harry smiled at Madam Pomfrey agreeably; time was he didn't like the hospital wing, now though it was a comforting place, one he enjoyed visiting each week for a checkup. He lay down without protest and stayed still as was custom when Madam Pomfrey had to cast a diagnosis spell. He watched her mutter the incantation waving her wand over the whole of his body. A ghost form of himself appeared above him detailing the bones, nerve ways, and internal organs as well as barely visible muscles. Harry watched the glowing blue form of himself with fascination.

Madam Pomfrey scrutinized his ghost self prodding the image here and there with her wand causing those areas to light up in more detail. Harry winced when he saw the scars on the ghost's ribs. The newer bone looked brighter to the ghost image then they would in

actual reality. Madam Pomfrey had explained that that was the way the spell worked, to show the newest progress in the healing in case there was something wrong with the healed spot.

Madam Pomfrey smiled a little after prodding the hands nodding to herself as she wrote notes on a piece of parchment, "Your hands are perfect," She declared, "the scars on the bones have faded from the spell completely. There's not even a trace of any of the breaks left."

Harry looked at his hands with a bemused smile, they were healed months ago, but because the scars on the bone had faded completely since the last time Madam Pomfrey had checked she declared them healed now instead of earlier.

"Hands down Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey frowned at him.

Harry dropped his hands down grinning sheepishly. He knew he wasn't supposed to move, but he couldn't resist.

"Now let's have a look at those legs," Madam Pomfrey moved to the end of the bed prodding his ghost feet, marking something on her parchment and then moved up to his ankles.

She frowned as she moved up his legs reading something in the glowing form of himself that he didn't understand. She prodded the legs again and again Harry had to close his eyes as the magic grew brighter and brighter. How she could see anything with all that magic blaring in her face he couldn't tell. Even with his eyes shut it glowed brightly to his magical vision.

He placed a hand over his golden eye to try blocking it out.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey warned glaring at him when he opened one eye to look at her.

"Sorry Madam," Harry winced, "It's really bright. It kind of hurts."

Madam Pomfrey sighed and re-chanted the spell. The image changed to a ghost Harry holding one hand over his right eye.

"Don't lower that arm even an inch," Madam Pomfrey warned, "The image gets fuzzy when you do." She had to re-prod his legs again allowing the spell to re-adjust, "Right then, questions." She stated, "How have you been walking lately? Any improvements?"

"Not that I noticed," Harry replied dutifully.

"From a scale of one to ten," Madam Pomfrey continued, "What is the range of pain you feel on a daily basis?"

"Anywhere from four to seven Madam," Harry said, "Depending on what I'm doing, how long I've been walking, ect..."

"How about at night?" Madam Pomfrey asked her frown deepening with his answers.

"It throbs Madam," Harry responded wincing, "The sleeping draughts help a little but the pain is constantly there."

"Well," Madam Pomfrey said with a huff, "Bone density percentage please," She commanded the spell.

The spell shimmered and then a few runes began to appear above each bone of his legs. Harry watched her read the runes with a dark confused frown. She wrote some more on her parchment then waved her wand dismissively. The diagnosis spell vanished and Madam Pomfrey walked quickly to her office muttering over the parchment. Harry waited patiently, his heart sinking a little. Was there something new wrong with his legs? Did he do something to them since coming back?

Harry waited questions running through his mind like clock work. It

would make sense if something else were wrong to him. He'd been through hell and made some bad decisions while he'd been on the run. He'd expected there to be consequences. In his experience everything in life had consequences. For every action there was a re-action. But what had he done to make his legs worse?

Madam Pomfrey came back a stern look on her face, "Now Mr. Potter," She said with her hand on her wide hips, "Tell me again, are you sure there have been no changes?"

Harry nodded, "None," Harry said carefully furiously going over every memory he had of the past three months.

"Well," She sighed beckoning a chair over with her wand and sitting down, "That is odd."

"What's odd?" Harry asked.

"It takes time for bones to heal, we all know that," She said informatively, "Usually with injuries as severe as yours we'd vanish the bone and grow new ones. We were terribly afraid though of how your magic would react to that. When you went into the hospital your magic was so protective of you that we worried it would see vanishing bones as an attack to your person."

Harry nodded, "Yeah, the healers told me that once."

"So they didn't do it then," Madam Pomfrey nodded, "But what they did do was try to give you skele-grow anyways to hopefully re-strengthen your bones. Your magic reacted rather violently to it, pushing the surgery back several hours while you were under." She frowned, "But the strange thing is that some of your bones, like the few that had been missing in your hands, have grown back after several weeks in bandages."

"Meaning...?" Harry asked.

"Meaning the Skele-grow worked, but it didn't work as it should have and it didn't work as well as it should have," Madam Pomfrey clarified, "Now though what is odd is that your leg bones are mending, rapidly re-strengthening almost as if you still had the potion in your system but..." She scrutinized Harry, "You still can't walk well. There's fire in your bones, where bone marrow should be." She shook her head, "I don't understand it. You should be able to walk on your own by now but you claim you still can't. It doesn't make any sense."

Harry rolled his eyes, "When has anything that has happened to me made any sense?" He asked.

Madam Pomfrey gave him a crooked smile for a fleeting second before the smile vanished, "All right then," She said, "Here's what I want you to do: when you have time and are with an adult, try taking a few steps without your cane. Tell me if you make any progress understand?"

Harry gave her a quiet smile, "Yes Madam pomfrey," He said.

Madam Pomfrey eyed him suspiciously, she'd known the boy long enough to know that what she'd told him should gain more of a reaction from him than it was.

"Can I go now?" Harry asked.

Madam Pomfrey nodded brusquely, "You may," She said.

Harry grinned at her and summoned his cane to him. The cane slapped into his hand and he carefully pulled himself up off of the bed. She watched him walk, noticing no difference in his gait except that he moved more confidently with the cane. She narrowed her eyes at the cane wondering. The diagnosis spell never lied. There was something wrong here, something maybe even the spell couldn't see. She'd have to watch the boy more closely, and the diagnosis

readings.

"Ah, look who's decided to grace us with his presence," Ron grinned at his best friend as Harry popped himself into the bench next to Ron in the great hall, "Finally decided to eat with the rest of us lowlifes?"

Harry smirked back at Ron, "I decided I could tolerate the stench of peasants," he said in his most regal imitation of Draco Malfoy.

"Oh shove off," Hermione rolled her eyes at the two of them from behind a book, "He only came back because the howlers stopped."

Harry shrugged, "Its true enough," He admitted, "its bloody difficult trying to eat while ignoring obnoxious screaming bits of paper."

"Not to mention the stares you receive while they scream," Ron shuddered in sympathy.

"And mine were particularly nasty," Harry grinned proudly, "Some of which shouldn't be heard by younger ears."

"You seem so proud about that," Hermione drawled.

Harry frowned at Hermione as he shoved food onto his plate, "You seem decidedly grumpy today," He said to Hermione.

She just grunted in reply from behind her book, "I'm behind on homework," She muttered as explanation.

Harry nodded to that; Hermione took her homework so much more seriously than he did. It was a plausible explanation.

"But you seem uncharacteristically chipper this evening," Harry accused Ron, "What are you on?"

"My best mate is not He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," Ron said with a wink, "We have a MOB meeting tonight, oh, and I haven't seen the toad at all today," He smiled wistfully, "Not even a glimpse."

Harry raised an eyebrow at that. He glanced at the head table noticing the obese woman's absence and his other eyebrow slowly rose as well. It wasn't often Umbridge would miss a chance to lord her presence over her students. Harry had endured the past two weeks in her forced presence in her classroom being as maddeningly polite and respectful as he could muster. He had acted as though that first day in her class hadn't happened at all and it infuriated the woman because he gave her no excuse to fight back. Not that she needed one.

Still it was almost fun turning her attempts at abuse into a joke when she tried. Fun in a sort of masochistic/sadistic compulsion...Harry frowned into his plate, he'd have to think about that later.

He scanned the head table ignoring the thought that he might be a tad sadistic grinning at Dumbledore when he winked at him and nodding solemnly to madam Sinistra whom was watching him with a suspicious glare. They'd come to an agreement the last time he was in trouble. Any more trouble would end with him hanging upside-down by his toes in a well. Harry had laughed the agreement aside secretly believing the woman could and would do it so he'd avoided trouble like the plague for the rest of the week. Even going so far as to run, (as well as he could anyway), in the opposite direction when the time came for one student or another to approach him with a scowl on their face. He was gaining a reputation for avoidance and as much as it hurt his pride, he feared his professor more.

"I'm not complaining," Harry said to Ron, "But I do like to know what my enemies are up to...I wonder what the Toad is doing."

"Frankly I could care less," Ron said stuffing a pork dumpling into his mouth, "Theh lessh ah shee of er teh bet'er." He mumbled around a mouthful of food.

"Oh I'm sorry," Hermione grouched putting her book down, "I don't speak pig."

"Wah-t?" Ron asked then swallowed, "You really are in a fit today."

Hermione glared darkly at him, "Well excuse me for being concerned." Hermione snapped, "You two are sitting here joking with each other as though all was right in the world. One second your fine the next you're a mess! I apologize if I can't keep up with your mood swings." She stood snapping the book shut and grabbing her bag.

Harry and Ron watched her storm out of the room in silence.

"Our mood swings?" Ron asked incredulously, "what about hers?"

Harry sighed shaking his head, "She's just stressed Ron," Harry explained, "She'll be better later." He silently apologized to Madam Sinistra feeling there was trouble brewing again on the horizon.

True to his prediction, Hermione was more agreeable when they met with her after dinner was well over in the third floor corridor. She was surprised and even pleased that Harry had finally decided to come to a MOB meeting. They discussed announcing his presence to the rest of the room but Harry adamantly refused to draw attention to the fact that he was there. As he said it he was to observe mostly anyways so there was no point in making him out to be the celebrity he really was. He was all ready bound to receive unwanted attention, he didn't want to capitalize on it and make it worse.

Thus as the other MOB members slowly trickled into the room of requirement only whispers and pointing found Harry who sat against a bookshelf reading the defense book he'd found there. It was a book

the room, he assumed, had summoned just for Harry as it was old and detailing in wandless defensive magic. Harry was wondering if he could take it out of the room when a silent coughing got his attention. He looked up, most of the students attending that night were there watching him expectantly. Hermione and Ron had looks of defeat on their faces and they shrugged at Harry apologetically.

Harry raised an eyebrow and a hand waving at the MOB members without putting his book down, "Hullo," He said. "I'm Harry, I'm here to watch and bestow my knowledge on those willing to receive it." The other students were staring at him so intently Harry felt he had to add something to his little introduction.

So he raised a fist, again, without changing his expression or lowering his book and said, "Down with the Toad." A couple of students lips twitched, a few giggled and Harry went back to his book.

"Hold on," A skinny Ravenclaw marched over to Harry with a scowl on his face, "What do you mean 'bestow you knowledge'?" He asked, "What can a gimp like you have to offer us? I heard rumors you don't even have a wand anymore."

Harry looked up at the ceiling with long suffering and sighed closing his book. He gave the Ravenclaw boy a solemn look and handed him the book for his inspection. The younger boy read the title and frowned.

"Impossible," He said, "Only really experienced wizards can do wandless magic."

"Not impossible," Harry said, "Just difficult. What was your name?"

"Zachariah Smith," The boy said informatively.

"You're in Ravenclaw house." Harry stated.

"Yes," Zachariah Smith said narrowing his eyes, "What of it?"

"I thought you of all people being in the clever house wouldn't have such a black and white view of magic," Harry stated, "Are you Pure Blood?"

"What's that to do with anything?" The boy asked drawing himself up defensively.

"Ah," Harry said, "Muggle born then."

The boy bristled, "My mum is a witch."

Harry grinned, "Even better," Harry said, "Actually, your blood has absolutely nothing to do with any of this except that because of the society we live in, Muggle born witches and wizards have more pressure to be ingrained in the beliefs and rules of the Wizard society. But magic is amazing isn't it?" Harry asked leaning over to rest his elbows on his knees, "We learn that when we're given our Hogwarts letters. Especially Muggle borns. Muggle born witches and wizards learn in that moment of knowing what we are that magic holds endless possibilities. As a Ravenclaw isn't it a need to know what all those possibilities can entail?"

Hermione grinned leaning against the wall. Harry didn't know it but he had the attention of every student in the room. Even Artemis and the other Slytherins who had come in discreetly were listening with rapt interest.

"With magic, very little is impossible," Harry stated, "Shame on you for placing magic in a little box with little rules. There are rules, don't get me wrong, but this is a force that will test the rules, pull at the boundaries and sometimes break them. With a little imagination," Harry grinned, "You'll find that most of the rules can be changed and your whole world will be thrown upside down."

Zachariah Smith sat down in front of Harry his keen eyes ready for another question as some of the other students did the same, "Well then, if you're so clever, show us."

Harry shook his head and shot his friends pleading looks. Hermione just grinned at Harry with the look of a cat that had caught its prey. Harry had a sinking suspicion that she'd imagined just this scenario for him from the get go. The other students began to fall back into MOB routine asking questions and practicing spells together pouring over defensive books. Ginny manned a chalk board with instructions for the new spells she and Hermione had drawn up to be learned. She winked at Harry when their eyes met. Harry sighed, it seemed he'd been adopted into the MOB successfully.

So he showed the circle of students around him a simple wandless levitation spell he'd only just mastered. He explained the theory behind wandless magic as he did so. He was even a little amused to find Zachariah Smith taking notes. Several students were in fact. It really was a study hall, one of relaxed patience for practicing and learning all that Professor Umbridge was denying them. But Hermione was right. They were improving well in their spells, but it was all mechanical, easy in the fact that each person worked the spells on their own time their partners waiting and playing completely by the rules. That simply would not do.

So as he gave his circle of students instructions on how to mediate, the first step in controlling ones magic wandlessly he stood and walked over to a couple of students who were practicing dueling and giving small suggestions on spells they could use against each other to surprise the other.

The Slytherin students had no trouble adapting to the art of surprising ones opponents. Harry found their control over their wands to be very good. So he mixed them up using wandless silent spells to trip one person here, and distract another there. At first his "help" was

unappreciated, but after the third time he'd tripped a Slytherin girl for making the same mistakes and then pointed that out to her she gave him a wry smile acknowledging that he might have known what he was talking about.

Harry walked through the room deftly avoiding any trips or falls with his cane until he reached Artemis and Ron. At first he was surprised to see them sparring with each other. Their wands were quicker than some of the other students and their concentration was spectacular, but what surprised Harry was the fact that the two of them would jibe each other with scathing remarks, retaliate, and then grin with friendly rivalry.

"When did he get over his prejudice?" Harry asked.

"When he realized what a prick he was being," Ginny answered beside him, "That's Artemis," She nodded to the tall Slytherin boy dueling with Ron, "He's a Slytherin, a year older than you guys but he was one of the first to join our group. Not sure what brought him here exactly just that he's really good at healing spells and is especially gentle with the younger years."

"So he and Ron are what, rivals? Friends?" Harry asked.

"Both I think," Ginny grinned, "The two had a big tiff in the beginning, while you were still away, but after that there was a sort of grudging respect between them. They duel with each other more than with anyone else. I think it's because they challenge each other."

Harry nodded, "I'm a little surprised," He admitted.

"What that Ron is friends with a Slytherin or that there are Slytherins here at all?" Ginny asked cutting directly through Harry's carefully raised walls.

Harry winced, "Both I guess," Harry said quietly, "I'd be lying if I told

you seeing Slytherin students in here didn't make me nervous."

"Is that why you've been paying special attention to them?" Ginny asked glancing at him sidelong.

Harry grinned, "You're a lot more perceptive then you let on aren't you?"

Ginny just smiled mysteriously, "I have Brothers," She said by way of explanation, "Why does it bother you?"

Harry watched two Slytherins teaching a couple of first years the shield spell, "I could have killed one of their parents this summer, any one of them, and I'd never know. They would know, but I wouldn't. How do I know I can trust them?"

"Not all Slytherins are under Voldemort's fingers Harry," Ginny chided, "Even if their parents might be. Not all children follow their parent's footsteps. Some will even fight against them. I imagine that would be a particularly difficult thing to do. I wouldn't want to find one of my family members on the opposite side of the field in battle." She placed a hand on his arm and smiled, "Give them a chance. Ron has." She looked at him gravely, "And that's saying something."

Harry chuckled a little, "Yeah," He said, "I'm trying."

Ginny smiled at him and walked away. Harry watched her finding more and more respect for the young red-headed girl. He shook his head as Zachariah came up to ask more questions which Harry answered with patience.

Eventually Harry found himself cornered by several girls wanting to know about his scars and how his right eye had turned color. They bewildered him as they vied for his attention and batted their eyelashes at him. Harry had to politely turn the conversation elsewhere as he noticed the attention their questions caused. He

eyed the curious Slytherin girl from earlier who had come up to listen with nervousness. He found an outlet in the form of a dreamy Luna Lovegood cornering him to talk about snorkraks and doobles. For all that he said he was trying he simply was not ready to face the Slytherin girl outside of professional criticism.

By the time the evening was over Harry was quite ready to fall into his bed and sleep a dreamless sleep. Ron teased him all the way to the common room about the girls that had surrounded him. Hermione ignored them both deep in thought as she muttered something to herself. When they finally did reach the common room and their beds Harry very gratefully fell into the world of dreams.

As he was Harry Potter though, he should have realized he would get anything but a dreamless sleep. Memories plagued him, the smell of burning grass from spell residue filled his nostrils. Something moved in the night with a white mask grabbing him from behind, suffocating him squeezing him. A mysterious door at the end of a corridor mocked him across the long hall that caged him. Harry latched onto that image fleeing from the nightmare memories that plagued him and willing the door to open. He focused all of his thoughts on this then awoke with a gasp when his forehead erupted in fiery pain. His eyes opened to the ghost of a little boy suffocating a little girl in rags with his own grimy hands.

Harry kicked off the covers that had tangled themselves around him flailing his arms as he grabbed the curtains around his four-poster bed. Sweat clung to his skin and he swung his legs over so energetically that when his feet met the ground he gasped as pain flooded his bones. He froze clutching the edge of the mattress his bare chest heaving with the effort to breathe. It was a testament of his control that none of the sheets were scorched but he still felt his fire hover uncertainly beneath his skin ready to leap out at a moment's notice as it had been when he'd been on the run.

I'm not there, he thought, this is Hogwarts, it's safe. I'm fine.

Harry slowly pulled his legs up to his chest wrapping his arms around them and massaging the stiff muscles. Ghosts, demons, memories...That's all they were. He was safe, he was in a castle with thick stone walls and innocent children surrounding him. Not open fields and Death Eaters. Harry breathed slowly forcing his mind into a meditative state still smelling charred flesh and blood from his fingertips.

"Oi," Harry looked up.

Ron was holding his curtains open watching him with knowing eyes. His arm was still bandaged Harry's eyes followed the white bandages down from Ron's elbow to the fingers that held the curtains open. Safe he thought feeling the word to be shaky in his own mind.

He closed his eyes, "I'm fine Ron," Harry said.

"Sure you are," Ron nodded agreeably, "You probably just need a bit of air."

Harry nodded.

Ron pushed the curtains aside and walked over to the window on the other side of Harry's bed he opened it letting in a blast of icy air.

"It's snowing," Ron said surprised.

Harry got up hobbling up next to Ron to lean on the windowsill, "About time," Harry sighed, "Feels good, the cold."

"Yeah," Ron sat on Harry's bed as Harry leaned his head on the side of the window and closed his eyes, "Christmas break isn't too far away," Ron said conversationally, "Will you spend it with Snuffles?"

"And you," Harry pointed out, "And Hermione and the Grangers

remember? Your Mum wanted us all together this Christmas."

Ron grinned, "Oh right," He shook his head, "Between everything I forgot you really are our brother."

"Not in name or blood," Harry muttered, "But in every other way that counts yeah. You forgot about the double Guardianship." He said shooting Ron a quiet grin.

"If you hadn't noticed a lot has happened since then." Ron said defensively.

Harry snorted, "Understatement of the century Ron."

Ron grinned, "So," He said, "It didn't take you long to start helping out at the meeting tonight."

Harry sighed, "I can't help it, I have this never ending urge to help people."

Ron chuckled, "Which is probably why you don't hate Voldemort like you should."

"Dumbledore would say I'm the bigger man for it," Harry sniffed mock defensively.

"Yeah well Dumbledore's always been a bit daft," Ron stated smartly, "Anyone sane would say you were an idiot."

Harry laughed.

"Don't want to interrupt your 'moment'," A groggy voice to Harry's right grumbled, "But some of us are trying to sleep."

Harry grinned at the tousled head of Seamus poking out of the curtains, "Sorry," He said, "We'll keep it quiet."

Seamus stared blankly at Harry for a minute and then pulled his head back into his bed. Harry and Ron looked at each other. Ron winced as Harry shrugged.

"I guess that means good night," Harry said bemused, "'Night Ron."

Ron rolled his eyes, "I wasn't the one having difficulty sleeping, g'night." He walked over to his bed holding the curtain open he looked back at Harry, "Get some sleep idiot. Hermione'll skin me alive if I didn't make sure you were rested." Ron crawled in closing the curtains shut behind him.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry waved, "I will."

Harry's smile faded and he stayed up watching the shadows of snow fall. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep the rest of the night so he settled down to meditate and solidify his occlumency walls. The hours ticked by slowly turning the sky from dark grey to pearl pinks and silvers peaking through the clouds. The snow was still falling heavily on the castle grounds and as the light smoothed out the world became a black and white film as morning cast shadows in the clouds.

Ron found Harry asleep covered by a soft layer of snow and ice. His breath came out in warm puffs of grey as he was tucked in the still open window.

"Well are you going to wake him up then?" Neville asked nervously beside Ron.

"That can't be healthy," Dean muttered from behind Neville.

"Are you sure you can wake him up?" Seamus asked, "Isn't it bad if someone falls asleep in the snow?"

Ron frowned darkly at Harry and grabbed his shoulder, "Harry you bleater, wake up! Hermione is seriously going to kill me if you die because you fell asleep on the windowsill when you should have been in bed!" He shook Harry causing snow to slip off the boy in chunks.

When the chunks fell away the four boys watching dropped their jaws. There was steam rising from Harry's skin where the snow had been. In fact if they looked closer Harry was soaked to the bone and dripping a large puddle on the floor.

Harry opened a groggy eye, "What're you waking me for?" He asked slapping Ron's hand away sending droplets of water into the air, "I was comfortable."

"Comfortable," Seamus stated incredulously, "He's covered in snow! It's bloody freezing in here!"

"Feels good," Was Harry's 'coherent' sigh.

"Well it doesn't to the rest of us," Ron snapped not knowing whether to feel angry with his friend for worrying him or relieved that he was all right, "Do you want to miss breakfast?"

Harry's eyes snapped open, "Food?" He asked swinging his legs down only to stumble and almost fall before Ron and Neville caught him.

"Merlin, you're an idiot," Ron growled shoving him onto Neville who helped the soaked boy sit on his bed.

Harry frowned at his housemates, "Why am I all wet?" He asked.

Dean Seamus and Ron looked at each other with scowls, "You tell him," They ordered Neville leaving the room rubbing cold hands together and grumbling about idiot prodigy children.

Neville looked at Harry worriedly, "You fell asleep on the window," He explained, "You were covered in snow and somehow melting it..."

"Oh," Harry said sheepishly, "Right, sorry. Must've scared Ron a little."

"You scared all of us," Neville said quietly but sensibly, "It is really cold in here."

Harry winced, "Sorry," he said again, "I don't feel the cold as easily as you guys I guess. Must be a side-effect of the fire. I always feel hot so it felt good to me...Hand me my cane will you?"

Neville nodded retrieving Harry's cane and handing it to him. Harry stood and walked over to the stove in the middle of the room. The wood was frozen. Harry winced again and fire grew over his hand dancing along his skin. Neville watched fascinated as Harry first gripped the logs blowing on them to dry the ice from them then coaxing them to life with his fire.

"Close the window will you?" he asked from his crouched position, "It's hard for me to stand after getting this low."

"Do you need help?" Neville asked hesitating by the window.

"No," Harry grunted grabbing the top of the stove with one hand and clutching his cane with the other as he pushed himself up, "Just takes a bit longer then it should."

Neville nodded grabbing the window and pulling it shut. Just as he latched the window shut, and Harry stood up strait the door to the boys' dormitory slammed open and Hermione charged into the room her wavy hair billowing behind her with her robe.

"Sleeping in the window?" Hermione hissed, "In the snow?"

Harry seemed completely unfazed by her fierce anger. Neville shrunk against the wall knowing what the young woman could be like in a towering rage. Harry grinned widely at her and flung out an arm in greeting.

"Good Morning Hermione!" Harry practically sang.

"What the hell were you thinking?!" Hermione snapped, "You should be in a coma right now!"

Harry shook his head even as he wrapped an arm around her and sighed, "I know, I know," He said soothingly, "Ron was worried?"

"Your damn right he was worried you prick!" Hermione growled as she thumped his chest with her fist, "Any normal person would be in the hospital room by now! Do we have to watch your every move so you don't do something stupid?"

"I know and I'm sorry," he said, "For the sake of my roommates I won't be doing it again. I think they were in more danger than me."

Hermione shoved away from him still glaring at him but her anger had cooled. Neville shook his head amazed at how easily Harry had calmed her down.

"But hey!" Harry said with a grin, "Apparently the snow can melt on my skin and I can be exposed without any consequences! It felt good 'Mione! I bet this is a new side effect we didn't think about! What else can this mean?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes, "You're not getting out of this by distracting me Harry. You'd better apologize to Ron."

"And I will," Harry nodded agreeably, "But you're not in the least bit interested about the fact that snow has so little effect on me?"

Hermione sighed, "Of course I'm interested and I'll be asking a million questions later. But right now I'm peeved. Later you can make it up to me and Ron by letting us experiment with this new side effect outside." As she had spoken her face had developed a dangerous grin that promised much suffering at her enjoyment.

Again Neville was amazed to see Harry smile back, "I look forward to it," He said.

"Good," Hermione said turning on her heel looking back as she walked out, "Get dressed and hurry up then, I want breakfast."

Harry nodded and she closed the door to the room. Neville slumped against the wall letting out a breath of relief.

"I don't know how you do it," Neville stated honestly, "She can be terrifying."

Harry nodded and breathed out a sigh of relief, "Yeah she can," Harry admitted, "The trick is not to let on you know she's scary." He shrugged, "And she calms down quick enough if you let her."

Neville shook his head grabbing his school books, "'If you let her'," He mumbled, "Mad, the lot of you."

Harry grinned, "I'd be bored otherwise," He said to Neville's retreating back.

Harry grinned to himself and got dressed. While most of his housemates had put on sweaters and warmer clothing Harry just donned his usual jeans and t-shirt combination. And as it was a week-end he put on his dragon hide cloak feeling even it would be too warm. Strange that he now noticed how warm he was.

Harry shrugged to himself and left the room making sure the stove

would warm the room for his roommates later. He met Hermione and Ron in the great hall and apologized to him and his roommates. After breakfast Hermione and Ron dragged Harry outside where half the school was congregating to throw snow balls at each other and force Harry through "experiments" that ended up with more than just Ron and Hermione "experimenting" on him. To his utter sorrow Harry realized he couldn't hold snowballs. Either they'd become ice by the time the snowball met its target or it would melt too rapidly to stick together when he tried to make it.

Other than the tragedy of realizing he couldn't participate in snow fights Harry realized he loved the feeling of the snow on his skin. He soon discarded his dragon hide trench and played with his friends in short sleeves mock dueling and making snow angels. So by the time lunch came around they all had rosy cheeks and were grinning like idiots.

"Merlin I'm starving," Harry grinned plopping himself next to Ginny as Ron and Hermione sat next to each other across from them.

"Id' say you were always hungry but Ron took that title years ago." Ginny grinned.

"Yeah," Harry smirked, "but he hasn't ever gone months without enough food to fill a beggars stomach, I have." He lifted his bowl of soup and regarded it with dreamy eyes, "Food is amazing!" He kissed the side of the bowl happily much to the amusement of those watching then plopped it on the table to each from it with sighs of happiness.

Hermione and Ginny looked at each other and laughed. Harry and Ron looked up simultaneously both with full mouths uttering "What?" around the food. Hermione and Ginny rolled their eyes.

"Never mind," Hermione sighed, "Just eat."

Harry shrugged and Ron grinned. Neville sat down next to the four his hands shaking as he grabbed some pork and filled his bowl with stew nearly spilling the stew as he ladled it out.

"Neville?" Ginny asked her keen eyes sharp as she watched the trembling boy, "Are you ok?"

"Yeah," Neville nodded, "Just cold. It's really cold in here isn't it?"

Harry put his spoon down eyeing Neville carefully, "Your pale," He pointed out reaching out with his awareness to feel the other boys aura.

It was weak and cold feeling. Harry frowned and reached across the table to clap the back of his hand to Neville's forehead. Neville jumped back from Harry's hand as though it had burned.

"I'm fine," The usually docile boy snapped.

"He feels warm but I'm not a good judge of that," Harry nodded calmly, "I'm going to go get Madam Pomfrey."

Neville opened his mouth to protest but Harry was all ready gone. When he came back Madam Pomfrey declared Neville had the common flu, a result she claimed of too long exposure to cold. She took Ron, Dean and Seamus with her to make sure they weren't sick after Harry explained sheepishly about the open window. Dean had the beginning symptoms but Seamus and Ron were fine. A few potions and a night in the hospital wing and the two sick boys would be fine.

The rest of the day was spent more soberly on Harry's part. He spent it visiting Neville and Dean apologizing profusely and studying with Hermione and Ron in the Library. He went to bed stoking the fire in the stove, just in case, and making sure the window was shut tight feeling responsible for his friends getting the flu even if it was as

minor a problem as the common flu virus.

The dreams that night, followed along the same lines as the night before, only worse. Harry woke up in a cold sweat feeling still the cold clammy hands of the woman in his dream on his arms. Her high pitched laughter followed him into the waking world. He stumbled out of his bed hobbling with great effort to the bathroom collapsing next to a toilet and dry heaving.

He wiped his mouth when his stomach settled a green tinge still lingered at the corner of his eyes, the result of watching Bellatrix LeStrange casting the crucio curse again and again. It was, she had whispered to him sweetly in the dream, her specialty after all. Harry leaned over the toilet again as another wave of nausea threatened to disrupt his fond memories of that evening's meal.

Harry hobbled back to bed with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He glanced at Ron's bed feeling grateful the boy was sleeping so soundly. Ron, like Harry, had been subject to too many nightmares as of late as well as too little sleep. Ron deserved a night of dreamless sleep as much as Harry did.

Harry sat down on his bed with a contemplative expression on his face; again there had been a door in his dreams, in a corridor that Harry himself had never been in. His memory of the summer was ridiculously acute. He knew and remembered all the places he'd been, that corridor had not been one of them.

He closed his eyes and tentatively pulled out some of the memories he'd accidentally gained from Voldemort. Sifting through them carefully he shoved them back into their places and sighed. It wasn't a corridor from Voldemort's memories either. But it kept popping up, last night, and a few nights ago as well and whenever it did his scar would pulse tremendously and a spot in his chest would constrict painfully.

Harry lay back down feeling nervous while trying to shove off the image of the strange door as a manifestation of distraction; sort of like he'd always imagined the white ceiling so that he could trick Voldemort into not knowing where he had been during the summer. Harry shrugged feeling that his explanation was as close to the truth as he was letting himself get. He wanted the door because it served as a distraction from his memories, but he shied away from it because if it wasn't what he thought it was it may have something to do with a connection that he'd hoped had been severed in the astronomy tower.

He closed his eyes and focused on the door allowing it to fill his mind as he once again fell asleep. As long as he clung to the door the dreams were held at bay, and so it was with the foreboding sense that he shouldn't Harry Potter fell asleep willing the door to open not knowing that it all ready had.

There we are, the next chapter. Hope it was enjoyable. Haven't really focused on the every day aspects of the trios lives as much as I'd wanted to so i felt that that would be a strong point in this chapter. The bit with Madam Pomfrey is important for later chapters his legs progress is a HUGE concern in this story which is why I like to comit more time to it. This will bring up questions and they will be answered in later chapters. Guess thats all I have to say for the time being. Ciao for now.

-Red

Screams in the Night

Hermione Granger walked through the corridors feeling as though she were swimming in a fish tank. Her head held up proudly she walked with confidence while inside she was seething with annoyance and nervousness. For the past two weeks she'd had a painful glimpse into the life of Harry Potter and if it continued any longer she would seriously be more than willing to hex somebody.

"Take a picture it will last longer," She snapped at a group of girls who were pointing at her and whispering.

The girls dispersed with disapproving gazes as Hermione glared at anyone willing to continue staring at her. It was amazing how quickly a corridor could become empty. She sighed having dealt with worse before being Harry's friend one would think she could get used to it, but considering the rumors about her, Harry, and Ron that were circling...Hermione shook her head with annoyance. It was one thing to claim that she was an attention seeking brat whoring after famous men, another to claim that she was a manipulative rumor monger falsely accusing a Ministry official of doing horrible things to a student with no grounds for proof.

Frankly speaking, Hermione Granger was being closely watched by a group of Aurors loyal only to the Minister of Magic, AKA: Umbridge. Fudge was the Minister of Magic of course, but the Aurors were only loyal to him in name, the mad Dolores Umbridge had quite a bit more power in the ministry than her boss. This was the main reason for all of her stress. She was researching The Toad to the best of her abilities. She was as discreet as she could possibly be with all of her owls being intercepted. Her only consolation was that Dolores Umbridge's goons could not enter the school premises without the proper authority allowing.

As it was Dumbledore and The Ministry were not currently on the best of terms and unless Fudge himself decided to make an

appearance upon the unfounded rumor that a Student was making an inquiry about a certain employee of his there was no possible way that was going to happen.

"My the Wrakspurts are quite active around you today," The dreamy eyes of Luna Lovegood startled Hermione out of her fast-paced steps stopping Hermione in her tracks, "You seem particularly vexed this morning Miss. Granger."

Hermione scowled darkly at Luna and Luna smiled back dreamily, "I have a lot on my mind Luna." Hermione snapped then instantly regretted it.

It wasn't Luna's fault she was in such a foul mood after all. But it certainly didn't help that Luna still smiled patiently at Hermione even when she was being cross with her. Hermione bristled.

"Wow," Luna said again, "They swarm faster the more annoyed you get. But I guess it can't be helped. You have a lot to worry about these days." She smiled reaching her arm up slowly she patted Hermione's head three times, "It's ok though, soon we'll all have a great deal to worry about. Has Harry told you about his dreams?" She asked, "They are the most marvelous mystery." She smiled once more at Hermione and in one movement she turned and decisively stepped in the opposite direction.

Hermione watched her go with her mouth open and her face scrunched up in a mixture of annoyance and confusion. She too turned on her heel heading away from the library a mental storm cloud forming around her. There was something wrong with that Luna Lovegood. Hermione could never place what it was either. All she understood was that, for some reason or another, the girl rubbed her in the wrong way.

Hermione scowled and began to force herself to count her breathing as she walked. What had Luna meant when she'd talked about

Harry's dreams being a "marvelous mystery"? And why was Harry telling Luna his dreams anyways?

"I hadn't," Harry said after swallowing a piece of biscuit during breakfast, "I don't talk about my dreams at all if I can help it. You sure Luna wasn't just messing with you?" Harry grinned at Hermione.

Hermione shook her head and sighed looking up at the ceiling her chin in her palm, "Maybe," She said, "She does have a peculiar sense of humor." She glared at Harry sliding her face down her palm so her cheek was now supported by the hand and her head watched him sideways, "What's this 'if you can help it' craziness. You tell Ron and me some things about your dreams."

"Yeah," Harry said pointedly looking at her as he stabbed a carrot with his fork, "Some things. My dreams aren't exactly pleasant. I'd rather keep some of that in the dream world and not the waking one thank you very much."

Hermione continued to stare at him unperturbed a sly smile pulling up her lips, "Didn't your psychologist tell you it was bad for you to keep your nightmares bottled up inside you?" She asked wickedly.

"What would that shrink know about my dreams huh?" Harry snapped.

Hermione grinned, she'd hit a sore spot for him, "I'm only saying it might be good to get some of it off your chest." She dropped her hand to the table to roll her eyes at him, "You didn't have to snap at me."

Harry rolled his eyes back and allowed a small grin to slip past his guard, "Whatever, you know I don't like talking about the psychologist and all the things that should be wrong with me." He accused, "You

were just trying to get a rise out of me."

"And it worked," Ginny sat down next to Harry grabbing a plate and some food, "So what happened to put Hermione in such a picky mood?"

"Luna," Harry said by way of explanation.

"Ah," Ginny said raising her eyebrows and nodding, "That would do it."

"I am not in a 'picky' mood," Hermione automatically defended, "I just wonder what Luna meant by 'marvelously mystery'."

Harry shrugged, "Who knows. It's Luna." He popped a strawberry into his mouth chewing and swallowing before he spoke again, "I barely know the girl but even I can see she's a bit odd. And that, coming from me, means something."

Hermione nodded, "As you are the epitome of the word 'odd'."

Harry regarded her looking down at her from his nose his chest puffed up in imitation of a peeved Professor Snape, "I'll take that as a compliment," He said in his most lofty voice then slumped, "Oi, do either of you know the answer to number thirty three on the History quiz?"

"We did that quiz yesterday," Hermione said.

"Haven't done it yet," Ginny shrugged, "A year behind remember?"

Harry blinked for a moment regarding Ginny in confusion, "Oh," He said, "Right. Sometimes I forget."

Ginny rolled her eyes and grinned, "Compared to you and Ron I must be the picture of maturity."

"Oh ha ha," Harry said sarcastically around a fifth strawberry.

"Case and point," Hermione stated with lidded eyes.

Harry had the decency to swallow and look away embarrassed while Hermione and Ginny shared a good laugh at his expense.

"Ron!" Harry shouted when he spotted the red head stumble through the doors to the great hall, "My friend! My comrade!" Harry stood flinging both arms out the picture of juvenile joy.

Ron walked passed Harry's outstretched arms, "You were acting like an idiot in front of the girls again," Ron stated and plopped down next to Hermione, "I'm too tired to play today. Where's the porridge?"

Ginny shoved the serving bowl with porridge in it across the table and Ron mechanically shoveled spoonfuls into his own bowl his eyes drooping dangerously as he did so.

"Bad night?" Ginny asked.

"Weird dreams," Ron replied as he ate.

"Maybe you should 'get it off your chest'?" Harry said suggestively raising his eyebrows at Hermione.

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him in response.

Ron looked, "I will if you will."

"Ha!" Hermione grinned, "See? Even Ron thinks you need to talk about your dreams!"

"You too huh?" Ron asked, "Sorry mate, dreams are the worst."

"No," Harry frowned at Hermione, "Dreams are good. Nightmares are bad. Those are what suck."

"So what was yours then?" Ginny asked Ron.

"A dream," Ron said then groaned and buried his head in the table, "And also a nightmare. I really don't want to talk about it."

"All right," Hermione nodded, "What about you Harry? Dream or nightmare?"

"Nightmare," Harry answered automatically pushing his food around his plate his head shot up and he glared at Hermione, "Oi, didn't I tell you we weren't discussing my dreams?"

"Not in so many words no," Hermione said looking sideways, "We were discussing Luna and your dreams just happened to come up."

"Just happened," Harry shook his head with a sigh, "Remember when I told you about how I'd stare at the ceiling whenever...you know."

Hermione nodded.

"Well now to escape my dreams I imagine a door apparently." Harry shrugged, "That's all ok?"

Hermione frowned, "Why a door?"

Harry shrugged, "Beats me. All I know is that I know that if I open that door, I can escape. And that's it."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, "You know?" She asked.

"I just know Hermione," Harry said, "I told you some of my dream, so drop it ok?"

Hermione sighed, "All right," She said, "Excuse me for my ever present worry."

"Your excused," Harry said looking up at the ceiling.

Hermione hit Harry's arm, "That was sarcasm."

"Mine wasn't," Harry said absentmindedly, "I'm being summoned," He said standing up unaware of Hermione's angry expression.

Hermione and Ginny watched him leave speechless he could be so cold. It was rare for Harry to be so inconsiderate and crass. They looked at Ron and Ron shrugged.

"His dreams are a sore point you know?" He said, "You don't hear him scream at night. I sleep right next to him."

Hermione looked back at Harry's retreating figure now worried she might have upset him, "I suppose I should apologize."

"No," Ron shook his head, "Did you see that distant look? That was Madam Sinistra summoning him. Beside he was pretty short with you too. You two can apologize to each other later."

Hermione hesitated then grabbed her books, "I'd rather apologize now," She said jumping up from the table and running after Harry.

Ginny looked at Ron, "Do you ever get the feeling they're closer then they let on?"

"I would," Ron said, "Except I know them both so well I know it's more a brotherly-sisterly kind of closeness." He shrugged, "The thought of them together has never really crossed my mind."

"Hmm." Ginny said resting her chin on the back of her hands.

"Did my instructions give you any indication that you should put wormwood into the cauldron at any point of time?" Madam Sinistra asked from behind her desk while she graded paper.

Harry froze and then frowned at the wormwood on the table that he'd just been chopping up to put in the cauldron. He grabbed the sheet of paper that Madam Sinistra had given him that had a list of instructions written on it and squinted at it.

"No," Harry said surprised, "There's no wormwood in this potion at all."

"Then why were you chopping it up?" Madam Sinistra asked patiently.

"Because for some reason I knew there was supposed to be wormwood in this potion." Harry said perplexed, "I don't know where I got that notion in the first place..."

Madam Sinistra put the parchment she'd been grading down, "It's not like you to improvise in potions." She said carefully, "You tend to be the sort to follow the instructions only as far as shortcuts allow. Tell me Harry, What are the properties of wormwood?"

Harry shrugged, "Isn't it a calming herb, with some psychedelic effects best used in Sleeping draughts and calming potions?"

Madam Sinistra nodded, "Yes, it is good for that, what else?"

"If used in the right dose with the correct combination of other ingredients it can become a poison..." Harry's eyes widened and he nearly dropped his knife, "Oh, oops."

Madam Sinistra raised an eyebrow from behind her desk, "Which ingredients?" She asked.

"Uh..." Harry blushed, "These ingredients. It creates a poison if you combine these exact ingredients with wormwood."

"A rather nasty one at that too," Madam Sinistra nodded placing her chin on entwined fingers her eyes grew a wicked glint.

Harry frowned, "You picked this potion on purpose." He accused.

"I wanted to test you to see if you were indeed doing the reading I required of you." Madam Sinistra agreed, "I should say I'm pleased you did exactly what I'd predicted you would do, but I'm not."

"You always make me drink the potions after I've made them," Harry frowned darkly.

"And I had a bezoar in my desk ready if you had actually made the poison and drank it." Madam Sinistra said pulling the bezoar out and placing it on her desk.

Harry stared at the root on the desk and then sat down looking at his professor intrigued, "Why then?"

"Why this potion?" She asked.

Harry nodded.

"I knew this potion was going to be too advanced for your current abilities. You've never laid eyes on it before but you have seen the ingredients listed in your book." Madam Sinistra explained, "Not knowing the potion your mind automatically jumped to what you did know about the ingredients and so your body began acting upon what your mind knew. The poison is not a particularly difficult one to brew but its effects are far different from the potion I gave you to

procure."

"So you wanted to test me on what I knew?" Harry asked.

"You knew the poison, you've read how to brew it and what ingredients it required. What I wanted to do was show you how easily you can create something completely different from what you intended with one ingredient change." Madam Sinistra smiled.

"Huh," Harry grinned, "I think your underestimating me a little Professor."

"Oh?" Madam Sinistra asked raising an eyebrow her eyes alight with challenge.

"I don't think this potion is too advanced and I'll prove it to you," He grinned rolling up his sleeves.

"By all means then," Madam Sinistra smiled, "Prove me wrong."

Harry glared at her suspiciously thinking she was being far too trusting of him when she rarely trusted him to even clean up his messes.

He lowered his arms and frowned, "Why is it too advanced for me?" He asked.

"Because of the intent," Madam Sinistra stated, "This is a type of healing draught that can only be brewed with the purest of intent. Not only the intent of the brewer, but the intent also of the patient. Most people want to be cured yes?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded.

"But just because you want Healing doesn't mean you think you deserve it all the time, am I correct?" Madam Sinistra asked.

Harry furrowed his brows as he thought about her question, "I suppose you could say that..."

"That potion relies on intent for the magic to brew the concoction correctly." Madam Sinistra said, "The magic has to interact with the ingredients a certain way then the magic must be strengthened by the intent of the patient using it. The Patient and the brewer have to want to heal or be healed so completely they will do anything. One can brew the potion perfectly but if the intent is not there it will still be useless."

"Why create a potion that might not work?" Harry asked.

"Because magic is all about intent, and need," Madam Sinistra said, "Whoever created this particular potion must have been in desperate straits for something that would take advantage of magical intent. Perhaps their lover was dying? Who knows? Few have been able to produce this potion correctly in its purest form. Many have made it, and many have used it to some success but very few witches and wizards have perfected this potion to perform to its full potential."

"Then why have me brew it?" Harry asked.

"Because it is good to have a basic knowledge of how you should brew it, just as its good for you to know what each potion and poison tastes like so you can pick them apart before consuming them." Madam Sinistra answered.

"So I can pick my poison?" Harry asked, "That's why you make me drink every disgusting concoction I make?"

"So you know what's killing you and what isn't and how to counteract it." Madam Sinistra stated.

Harry's mouth snapped shut and he stared at the ingredients of the

potion silently. He wondered suddenly if he could brew the potion that relied so heavily on intent. He sat down again wondering if he was one of those people who thought he didn't deserve to be cured and if he was...was that the reason his legs were still so damaged? He'd had potion after potion shoved into him for months. Madam Pomfrey was at her wits end saying the bones were rapidly healing but there was no improvement in his walking. His hands clutched his knees and he glared at them.

He looked up at Madam Sinistra and smiled sadly, "Your right," He said, "I'm not sure I can brew this potion."

Madam Sinistra raised an eyebrow and nodded carefully, "I will expect you to try to brew this potion by the end of the year. Keep the instructions, meditate on them, in the meantime we will brew the poison you almost brewed earlier."

Harry nodded, "I can do that," he grinned standing he gripped the table and steadied himself then continued to cut up the wormwood.

Madam Sinistra smiled to herself then picked up the parchment she'd discarded earlier and continued grading while keeping a careful eye on her pupil.

Harry sat later that evening pale and shivering by the fire. A strange thing considering he was always hot. Wormwood in a poison was a bad idea on all accounts he'd decided, but he wasn't likely to forget the effects such a potion could produce. The wormwood's hallucinogen effects combined with devils snare bark made the subject drinking the potion re-live each and every nightmare they had with the added bonus of feeling the hallucination. If inhaled the subject would go into a seizure like state as their minds retreated into their worst memories.

It wasn't called the Dementor's Whisper for nothing. Harry never wanted to experience that again. He'd only really experienced it for about five seconds as Madam Sinistra had immediately given him the bezoar but five seconds had been enough. They worked the rest of the evening on a potion that would get rid of the most potent side effects after he'd been "cured". Even after taking that he felt weak and shaky.

Hermione approached Harry carefully her face creased in worry. Harry smiled shakily at her and she sat down next to him.

"The potion I brewed," Harry said as explanation, "It's fine, Madam Sinistra gave me the counter."

Hermione frowned, "Did you go to madam Pomfrey?"

"Yes, directly after I took the counter," Harry said, "It's ok 'Mione, you think Madam Pomfrey would let me leave if I wasn't going to be fine?"

Hermione nodded but was still frowning, "Harry listen," She said, "I'm sorry for pushing you this morning."

"About what?" Harry asked pulling a pillow over and hugging it to his chest for warmth.

"About the dreams?" Hermione said.

"Oh," Harry said, "That. Don't worry about it," He said, "I was short with you too and I was kind of out of it so seriously, don't worry about it."

Hermione frowned, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "Hey could you do me a favor?"

Hermione nodded, "Yeah, what?"

"Conjure a blanket or something for me?" He asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes, "All right," She waved her wand transfiguring the pillow he was holding into a blanket.

Harry grinned, "Thanks," He wrapped himself up in the blanket even going so far as to pull his knees into the cocoon he'd created, "It'll wear off," Harry said to Hermione's worried frown, "I promise."

"Uh-huh," Hermione said unconvincingly, "Do you need any help with homework?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "But it'll have to wait until this wears off. Ron was saying he needed your help at lunch."

Hermione nodded, "He's helping Neville with something."

Harry nodded, "Then I'm going to bed," Harry said, "Brewing potions, no, drinking potions is exhausting work."

Hermione smiled wryly, "I'll bet," She said.

Harry grinned weakly and stood clutching his cane tightly. Hermione watched him hobble over to the stairs. He paused at the bottom and seemed to gulp before he began bravely taking one step at a time. Hermione sighed wondering if he'd ever be all right or if this was the beginning to a road paved in trouble. Scratch that, Hermione frowned, it all ready was.

When Ron and Neville came in to the common room Hermione pushed her thoughts of Harry out of her mind and waved them down. There were healers that would do a better job at figuring out Harry's legs than she could. Still, Hermione felt there was an explanation hovering just out of reach and she itched to find it.

Harry's shivered clutching his dirtied and scared legs to his chest sobbing quietly behind an old shack of a tool shed. He shakily fingered the bulge in his left leg knowing it was broken. Harry shook and felt the sick heavy presence appear in the quiet Muggle back yard accompanied by the loud crack of apparation. He could smell them, cold, and bloody with heavy expensive perfume. They smelled like an expensive death, their footsteps were quiet and precise. They knew where he was.

With that cold realization Harry clenched his teeth, placed both hands on either side of his bloody and broken leg then smashed his hands together with all his might. He screamed as the bones snapped back into place giving away his precarious position...

He was on top of a building, nearly naked in ragged jeans and ripped up t-shirt, cold, staring at the gap between him and another rooftop with a growing sense of dread. He'd escaped, just barely and now he was going to plunge to his death. There was no way his legs would be able to cross that gap.

"Harry!" A sickeningly high pitched voice sang from somewhere behind him, "Where are you hiding?" Laughter followed the question.

Revulsion ran down Harry's spine shaking his body violently and resolve filled him. He would not be caught by her. Death was a much better alternative. He backed up ignoring his pain-filled legs. He wasn't sure how often he'd broken and re-set them but now was going to be another opportunity to do so, if he survived. He began running sharp white pain pushing him forward with conviction upon every step. He leapt...

And landed in a painfully white hallway. His legs were no longer hurting him, possibly because he had none. He slithered across the white pristine floor of the hallway intent on finding something. The

smell of human blood and flesh filled his sensitive nostrils creating with the senses an image of a man hunched over beneath something thin and shimmering in his magical vision. Behind the slumped over man was a door, it was the door that he wanted, the door he needed to get to and this human man was in his way...

Harry awoke feeling his fangs sink into the struggling body and feeling his life flowing away from him. He became aware of his screaming and thrashing at the same time he felt hands holding his arms down and a face very similar to the terrified face he'd just bitten...Harry screamed anew as he realized whose face it belonged to.

"Get away!" He screamed, "I killed you! I fucking killed you!" He was sobbing as he screamed, "Stay away from me I'll hurt you!"

"Harry!" Ron yelled, "Get a grip! You're awake you bleater!" He shook Harry hard forcing the struggling boy into realization.

Ron knew when Harry was truly awake when he gasped and clutched Ron's arms tightly, desperation in every pore of his being, "McGonagall, Dumbledore, Sinistra, anyone!" He gasped, "Now Ron!"

"McGonagall's already coming," Ron said, "It was just a nightmare."

"No!" Harry yelled desperately, "It wasn't! I bit him Ron! I bit your father!"

"You bit? What?" Ron asked incredulously, "You're not making sense."

"We need to go help him," Harry said pushing past Ron and hastily standing, "We need to—Fuck!" Harry yelled as his legs gave out beneath him, "Fucking legs!" He yelled feeling tears of frustration well up in his eyes.

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall said in shock, "Just what is going on in here?"

"Professor!" Harry cried with relief grabbing the hem of her robes he pulled himself to his knees looking at her desperately, "Mr. Weasley's in trouble!"

Ron's face paled as he realized what it was Harry was trying to tell him.

McGonagall froze, "Are you quite sure Mr. Potter?"

"Yes," Harry said feeling as though they couldn't move quite fast enough.

"All right," She said, "Mr. Weasley, if you would help Mr. Potter up. Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Potter's cane? Quickly now!" She snapped, "You two," She said gesturing at Harry and Ron, "With me. Now."

Ron helped Harry up, Neville handed Harry's cane to him shakily and Ron and Harry followed Professor McGonagall both feeling exhausted and scared. Ron kept a hand under Harry's shaking arm as they moved at a faster pace than Harry would have been able to perform without help.

When they reached Dumbledores office it took very little time for Harry to explain and Dumbledore to summon the troops of his office in the portraits. When Mr. Weasley was confirmed to be in the Department of Mysteries bleeding to death it took no time at all for Dumbledore to make arrangements and get Mr. Weasley to St. Mungos and the rest of the Weasley children and Harry out of the school.

So it was for the first time Harry stepped into Number 12 Grimmauld place to a worried Sirius Black.

"Harry," Sirius said helping Harry stand, "What's going on? Dumbledore didn't tell me much."

"In a minute," Harry gasped, "Shit, Hermione."

"I'll floo Dumbledore in a minute when the rest of the kids are through." Sirius said guiding Harry to a chair, "You sit down pup, you look like death."

"As opposed to normal?" Harry asked weakly.

Sirius gave him a wry grin and then ran back to help the other Weasleys out of the fireplace. Ron sat down next to Harry his face white his eyes staring off into space. Harry closed his eyes feeling somehow responsible for Ron's near catatonic state.

"What's going on?" Fred asked coming over to Harry.

"We were told Dad's in trouble," George followed his twin, "That you might--."

"He doesn't know much more than we do," Ron snapped, "Shove off."

Harry let out the breath he'd unconsciously been holding and placed a grateful hand on Ron's shoulder, "Thanks Ron," He said, "But that's a lie and you know it."

"Not really," Ron said, "All you know is dad's been bitten by something, you don't know why, and you don't know by what. Neither do we."

"Dads been bitten?" George asked.

Harry kept quiet. He'd bitten Mr. Weasley in his dream. It had been

him. He remembered the sensation of gliding, slithering across the floor. He'd been a snake, that much Harry knew. He closed his eyes and buried his forehead in his arms. It throbbed painfully like a distant call across the landscape. He knew what that meant. He hadn't been the only one in the snake. Voldemort had been there too.

Harry was vaguely aware of Sirius shouting something through the floor. He could feel Ginny sitting next to him on the floor by his feet clutching Ron's knees. Ron's hand rested on his sister's head. He could feel the curiosity of the twins as though they were needles poking into his skull trying to understand what was going on without seeming to be too pushy.

Sirius told them all that Mr. Weasley was in St. Mungos and Mrs. Weasley had accompanied him there. All of the Weasley family seemed to breathe a sigh of relief at the news that their mother was with their father. At one point they moved into the kitchen where Sirius brewed tea for all of the children. No one really spoke. Fear of loss was the focus of any emotion. Harry felt he was being squeezed on all sides by the feeling. The weight was simply unbearable.

A small ray of light arrived in the form of Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Both adults had become good friends to the Weasleys and worked tirelessly at getting the children's mind off of their father while they waited for positive, or negative news. They cooked a light stew and coaxed the children into playing Muggle card games, the type that one can lose oneself in easily without having to really think.

Harry stayed out of most of it, opting instead to watch with his arms clutching his knees to his chest while that night's dream played over and over again in his head. Warm arms wrapped around Harry's shoulders snapping him out of the re-play. His head shot up off his knees and he looked into the frowning face of Hermione as she dabbed a wet cloth against his forehead.

"Dumbledore summoned my Mum and dad," She explained pulling

the cloth away from his scar Harry was surprised to see a bit of rust-red smudge the fabric, "He and I agreed that since winter break would start in a few days anyway that maybe I should leave school early with the rest of you."

Harry nodded numbly as she continued to clean his forehead.

"What did you do to your scar?" She asked, "Did you hit it?"

Harry shook his head, "Didn't even feel it hurting..." He mumbled.

"Hmmm..." Hermione frowned.

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked.

"With his sister playing Hell," Hermione answered, "You should join them."

Harry pulled away from Hermione looking at the table. Hermione sighed placing her hands on her hips exasperated. She looked over at Ron and Ginny and pointedly nodded to Harry.

"Come on," Hermione said, "I'm not going to let you wallow Emo boy."

Harry opened his mouth to protest when Hermione pushed his cane into his hand then dragged him across the room to Ron. When she reached Ron and Ginny she gave both of them hugs and re-shuffled the deck of cards to deal out for four instead of two. The four of them said very little as they played, they didn't need to say much, but Hermione's solid presence calmed them.

It was well after three in the morning when any word came about Mr. Weasley. He had been stabilized. Mrs. Weasley was going to stay at the hospital with him for the rest of the morning, but after the news arrived the adults in the room shooed the children off to bed.

Everyone fell into bed gratefully. Harry fell into bed fearfully. Sure Mr. Weasley was all right, but Harry's dreams posed a new threat, the threat of Voldemort entering his mind. Sleep was a long time in coming.

So, theres that chapter. Wasn't sure origionally how to write it because of the whole AU vs. Canon timelines but it did get written. And now its done, thank the gods. Next chapter is being written but I can't guarantee when it will come out. Yay second week of school and all ready behind. _ Anyways, I'm sure I will get complaints, and people trying to correct me, and as always I love constructive criticism. Absolutely love it. Sorry to those of you who are die-hard timeline fans but seeing as how this is AU I hope you will allow for some flexibility. Wow, this is a negative note all around isn't it? I blame school.

Again, I hope it was entertaining.

Ciao!

-Red

Warmth Comes in Company

Harry awoke never having realized he'd ever actually fallen asleep on the couch in the parlor. A most delicious smell was coming from the kitchen pulling Harry out of his thankfully dreamless slumber to wonder just how he'd gotten on the couch in the first place. He must've moved down stairs after realizing sleep wouldn't grip him easily with a room full of Weasley's and fallen asleep while he'd contemplated all that had happened.

He sat up and rubbed a hand through his ridiculously unruly hair moving most of it out of his face so he could see the sunlight peaking through the curtains. The blanket he didn't remember pulling onto himself slid off onto the cushion causing chills to run down his spine as a difference of temperature invaded his bare chest. He stretched and warmth found its way back into his limbs banishing the chills and bringing him back to his overly warm normal temperature.

Merlin he was stiff! Harry stretched his legs giving out a soft moan as he did so. The crippled limbs didn't want to cooperate with him that morning. A result, Harry assumed, of sleeping on a who-knew-how-old couch with little to no "cushion" left in its springs.

Laughter coming from the Kitchen roused him still further and piqued his curiosity. That had sounded like Mrs. Weasley but he couldn't entirely be sure.

"Yes, yes, Jane," Mrs. Weasley said, "I know I'll tell him when I get back to the Hospital."

Harry grabbed his cane and forced himself to stand taking a few steps forward slowly allowing his stiff muscles to adjust to movement. He walked down the hallway passing Mrs. Black's silent portrait on the way into the Kitchen. A ragged and old looking house-elf glared at Harry through the shadows of the curtains hiding the portrait from view its yellow eyes embittered and sour. Harry reached out with his

senses memorizing the sick aura of the creature and mentally vowed to watch the elf while he resided in the house.

"Harry!" Ed Granger grinned at Harry as he entered the room, "You're up early."

"I'd expect that couch wasn't very comfortable," Sirius grinned, "I'd get up early too."

Harry glared suspiciously at his godfather, "Since when are you a morning person?" He asked having found out Sirius was anything but when he'd been cooped in the hospital.

Sirius shrugged, "Never went to sleep," He said as explanation, "Thant and I've had far more coffee then is healthy for an old man like myself."

"Uh-huh," Harry nodded, "That explains more then it doesn't."

"Hey pup," Sirius frowned, "Aren't you supposed to deny it when I say I'm old?"

"No point if it isn't the truth," Harry grinned and dodged a bread crumb.

"Now really Sirius," Mrs. Weasley huffed, "Who's the child here?"

Sirius raised an eyebrow, "I thought he was but I may be mistaken."

Harry snickered as Mrs. Weasley gave Sirius a disapproving frown. Her frown vanished relatively quickly however as she maneuvered herself around the table to hug Harry.

"Thank you Harry," She said.

Harry's jerked away from her with confusion at the sudden increase

of emotion radiating off the plump woman, "For what?" He asked.

"For warning Dumbledore," Mrs. Weasley said her fingers trembling, "You saved my husband Harry. Any longer in the state he'd been and the healers may not have been able to stabilize him."

"Oh," Harry said feeling undeserving of her thanks as he'd had a hand in hurting Mr. Weasley in his dream, "So...he is stable then?" He asked moving the topic of conversation away from him and towards the man in danger.

"Yes," Mrs. Weasley said with a large beaming smile, "The Healers said he will be ready for visitors this afternoon. The kids are coming, of course, but you'll join us too right? Arthur will want to give you his gratitude."

Harry nodded forcing a smile to his lips, "Thanks aren't necessary Molly, but I'll come."

"Oh you," Molly Weasley sighed, "Accept it when people give you thanks. Especially when you deserve it."

Harry smiled feeling as though he didn't deserve any gratitude at all, "All right Mrs. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley smiled at him.

"Well are you going to sit so I can give you breakfast?" Jane granger asked waving a spatula at the table.

Harry nodded, "Thank you Mrs. Granger."

Jane Granger placed a plate of Sausages and potatoes with two eggs in front of him. Harry grabbed a fork and spoon and dug in. It didn't matter that he felt worried and guilty for something he may or may not have done, food was food. Harry would never let another

morsel go to waste ever again if he could help it.

Thanking the adults again Harry walked upstairs to the room he shared with Ron and opened the door quietly. Their trunks sat magically at the ends of their beds where Harry assumed they had been brought over from Hogwarts sometime within the night. Ron was sleeping the same dead sleep Harry had been sleeping before the smell of sausage had awoken him. He moved as quietly as he could through the room feeling Ron, like the other Weasley children, deserved his hard-earned sleep.

He grabbed some clothes from his trunk using wandless magic to open the box silently and left the room in search of a bath room. He didn't have to walk far to find the restroom, gratefully, so it didn't take him long to relieve himself, shower and change into Muggle clothing.

When he got out of the restroom he passed a yawning Hermione who smiled at him half asleep and entered the room he'd just left. Harry grinned to himself, Hermione really wasn't awake until after she'd showered.

"Harry," Sirius grinned at him as he came up the stairs, "Come down here for a bit, I want to talk to you."

Harry nodded and dropping his stuff off in his room he followed Sirius down the stairs.

"All right pup," Sirius said sitting down in a chair in the study where they'd all come out of the floo that past night, "What's wrong. I think I know you well enough by now to be able to tell when you're not cheerful."

"How can I be cheerful with my foster father in St. Mungos?" Harry asked incredulously, "How can you?"

"I'm not," Sirius said, "What happened last night was a very grave

thing indeed and its confirmed some of the orders fears about Voldemort's movements."

"What fears?" Harry asked, "Where was that place Mr. Weasley was hiding in with an invisibility cloak? What fears has it confirmed other than my own?"

"Hold on, hold on," Sirius raised a hand and shook his head, "How do you know about the place Arthur was hiding and how he was hiding? What do you mean your own fears?"

Harry crossed his arms in front of his chest, "You first." He said.

Sirius sighed, "I've been told not to tell you everything, there are those in the order who don't want me to tell you anything. They argue your too young..."

"Too young to have been on the run for my life for nearly three months? Too young to know what it feels like to be hunted? Tortured?" Harry shook his head, "I only act young because I don't want to face how freaking old I've become. I'm no stranger to dangerous situations Sirius. I may wish it, but I'm not really an innocent child any longer."

"I know that Pup," Sirius sighed, "Our eyes mirror each other to bloody much. We've seen bad things you and I. You have seen worse probably than me even and that's saying something."

"So?" Harry demanded.

Sirius sighed, "Sit down Harry, I know that couch you slept on so I know how sore your legs must be."

Harry sat, "Their better after the shower," He mumbled.

The edge of Sirius's lips quirked up, "All right listen," He began,

"Voldemort is after something in the department of Mysteries in the Ministry. And how do you think ol'Fudge reacted when Dumbledore mentioned the department of Mysteries might need tighter security?"

"I imagine he threw a fit." Harry sighed.

"That he did," Sirius nodded, "He insisted that the D. have everything under control. Now, they probably do. Those blokes are more secretive than a corpse. They keep their secrets locked up tight. But Dumbledore feared, as he was right to, that they weren't as protective of the object Voldemort is after as they should be."

"That's what Mr. Weasley was doing," Harry said with dawning understanding, "He was guarding that door. That's why he hid himself in an invisibility cloak." Harry frowned, "But what is it Voldemort is after?"

"I'll ask how you know that again in a minute," Sirius said, "As for your question it's a weapon. One only two people in the world have access to."

Harry frowned, "What kind of weapon?"

"A kind of knowledge," Sirius said fidgeting in his seat.

"What kind of knowledge can only be accessed by two people in the entire world?" Harry asked.

"You're not asking the right question," Sirius said shaking his head, "You should be asking who not what."

"Well Voldemort is the one trying to get it right?" Harry asked, "Why are you dodging my questions anyways?"

"Because isn't it better to learn things for yourself then hear it from an elder?" Sirius asked innocently.

"Only if I get to shove a porcupine up said elder's arse," Harry growled.

Sirius barked out laughing, "Don't worry pup," He grinned, "I'm sure you'll tell Hermione all about this conversation and then she'll be able to help you decipher my cryptic words."

"You can't tell me what the weapon is can you?" Harry deadpanned.

"Nope," Sirius grinned.

"Figures," Harry sighed.

"All I can tell you is that Voldemort feels this knowledge can somehow push this impending war in his favor in a drastic manner," Sirius said, "Hence why Dumbledore feels it's important we put up more guards than the Ministry has ready."

"Well that makes sense then, even if you aren't going to tell me exactly what the weapon is..." Harry sighed and stood pushing himself up by pushing down on his knees, "Well I guess that's it then," He said, "Looks like all I'm gonna be able to do is wait for more news."

"Hold it pup," Sirius said holding up a hand, "You haven't answered any of my questions have you?"

Harry sighed and sat back down with a huff, "No," He said honestly, "I haven't. All right." He breathed in slowly calming his nerves using the breathing techniques from meditation, "I've been having some...weird dreams lately. Well no weirder than my normal nightmares and I guess that's why I didn't recognize it at first. I've somehow been going into Voldemort's mind subconsciously. I didn't actually know I could, and I really don't like it. But he's been obsessed with this door in a purely white corridor."

"The Department of Mysteries," Sirius nodded, "That explains how you knew about it."

"Yeah," Harry chuckled darkly, "I guess so. It's not a very pleasant realization. But last night I had one of the weirdest I've ever had and it consisted of a snake. I was a snake serious, scouting that damned door. I could smell Mr. Weasley through the invisibility cloak. I even knew he was there to prevent me from getting past him and into that door. I—watched as I bit him Sirius, felt my fangs sink into his flesh. It was...sickening. But it was him, I know it."

Sirius nodded, "Hmmm," He said, "So that means your connection is open again."

"Yeah," Harry nodded but didn't look at Sirius, "But it's never really gone both ways before. It was always Him, getting into my head, and me avoiding thinking about it."

"So either the connections gotten stronger or it's changed somehow," Sirius nodded contemplatively.

"Either or," Harry agreed, "and here I was no hoping it had simply broken and disappeared..."

"I know kiddo," Sirius sighed, "I was hoping that too."

Harry smiled sadly at his godfather. The room became quiet the dust particles danced circles around the magic that permeated the building. Old magic, some of it dark and twisted gave the room to Harry a shadowed and foreboding edge. He closed his eyes feeling a left over exhaustion from the night before and another exhaustion that was deeper and had little to do with physical sleep.

Sirius stood the fabric of his robes swished together loudly against the quiet din of the study. He placed a warm hand on Harry's

shoulder and Harry looked up at his godfather. The older man gently brushed Harry's long messy bangs from his face his fingers lingering against his scabbed over scar sorrow and compassion mixed in his eyes.

"Listen Kid," He said quietly, "I may not be good at the comforting crap but I want you to know...no matter what happens, you're my Godson. And as your Godfather I will be here to help you figure this stuff out ok?"

Harry nodded a small smile lifting years from his face, "Thank you Sirius," He said sincerely.

Sirius ruffled Harry's hair, "We're what's left Pup," He said, "You, me, and Remus are all that's left of our family. It's the least I can do."

Harry smiled and wrapped his arms around his Godfather gratefully. Sirius patted the back of his head and held him close. The boy really was far too much like him after all.

When Harry and Sirius joined the rest of the Weasleys and Grangers Harry had a much larger smile on his face then he had all morning. He took it upon himself to make sure Ron wasn't letting his fear for his father guide his emotions. He joined Ron and Hermione at the table where most of the Weasleys sat eating a late breakfast. His confident attitude and large mischievous grin lifted Ron and Ginny's attitude. It helped that Mrs. Weasley refused to let her children see her worry and that the Grangers continued to talk in fair spirits.

They decided to walk to St. Mungos. All of the Weasley children and their mother with Harry and Hermione walked the several block length to an old clothing shop with mannequins sporting clothing from the eighties with big bushy wigs. Harry and Hermione shared amused glances as the troupe spoke to the mannequins before

walking in to the busy waiting room at St. Mungos.

Harry kept his head down as he watched other patients in the office watching him with curious and even alarmed glances. He pushed a hand into one of his pockets wishing he had worn long sleeves instead of the short sleeved t-shirt he was wearing. He may be shaped like an ordinary teenage boy but the scars on his skin were grotesque. Ron was wearing long sleeves, well so was the rest of the well wishing party. It was December...but when Ron wasn't wearing long sleeves half his arm was wrapped up covering the evidence of abuse by Umbridge's hand. Harry could empathize.

After talking to the most bored witch Harry had ever seen they walked up several stairs to the ward Mr. Weasley was located in. The nurses there ushered the crowd into a large room with several people all ready in it. Dumbledore stood beside Mr. Weasley's bed, so did Remus and Tonks.

Mr. Weasley beamed at them all from his bed hugging each of his children as he talked about what the healers were doing. His face was all bandaged up as well as his shoulder and right arm. Harry flinched when he looked at each bandage remembering his fangs sinking into each one. He took a step back instinctually and Mr. Weasley caught his eye.

"Harry!" He said happily, "Get over here I want to thank you for saving my life!"

Hermione pushed Harry forward so that Mr. Weasley could embrace Harry. Harry awkwardly leaned over the bed wrapping his arms around the Weasley patriarch.

"If it weren't for you Harry," Mr. Weasley said with a large kind smile that made the knot in Harry's stomach tighten, "I wouldn't be here right now."

Harry blushed scarlet feeling embarrassed, "I'm-er, glad I had that dream then." He muttered.

Mr. Weasley laughed, "Kind of strange isn't it?" He asked jovially, "For you to be beside the hospital bed and me in it?"

Harry forced a smile, "Yeah," He agreed, "It is strange."

Mr. Weasley clapped him on the shoulder and Mrs. Weasley frowned.

"Why are you still bleeding?" She asked, "Shouldn't your bandages be taking care of that?"

"Well yes," Mr. Weasley said, "They would but...Did you know I met one of the healers that used to work with Harry in the muggle hospital?"

Mrs. Weasley narrowed her eyes, "Why are you changing the subject?" She asked carefully.

"I'm not Love, listen," Mr. Weasley smiled beseechingly at his wife, "Remember how they combined Muggle and Magical techniques to cure Harry? Well this Healer learned about a technique called 'Stich-ess'. It works really well for muggles and minor cuts so we thought maybe..."

Mrs. Weasley's face was turning red as she listened to her husband. Harry looked at Hermione with an amused expression. She rolled her eyes and shrugged in exasperation. When Mrs. Weasley exploded the children decided it was a good time to get out of the room. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and the twins practically raced out of the room.

"It was Voldemort," Hermione said as soon as they were out of earshot of any eavesdroppers, "Wasn't it? The connection is open

again."

Harry sighed and nodded, "Yeah."

"Connection?" Fred asked.

"Voldemort?" George said.

Harry looked at the twins and Ginny's expectant face. They all craved knowledge about what happened last night, why Harry had somehow saved their father while being miles away from him. They deserved to know but it was...personal.

"Last Summer when Harry was on the run he said Voldemort could read his mind or something," Ron said leaning against a wall with his arms crossed, "His scar, it has something to do with it."

Harry smiled at Ron gratefully.

"So what," Fred frowned, "Your like, possessed?"

"No," Harry shook his head, "At least I don't think so. I can feel him, his emotions, thought not his thoughts. He can feel mine too only he goes into my head."

Fred, George, and Ginny stared at him. Harry had to look away from them their expressions scared him more than he wanted to admit. The three looked at each other when Ron and Hermione unconsciously moved closer to Harry glaring at the three Weasleys.

"You could be the weapon," George said before he thought about it, "The one the Order keeps talking about."

Harry's face drained of color, "No," He said, "I've been working with Dumbledore to prevent that. I'm not the weapon. Your father was guarding the weapon last night when I—Voldemort's snake got him."

Ginny elbowed her brother hard in the ribs, "We know you aren't the weapon Harry," She said, "You can't possess someone unless they have no body. I should know."

Harry nodded and their eyes met with a mutual understanding between them. She understood what it was like, to have Voldemort's sick, tainted presence in her head. It was comforting in a way to know that someone understood.

"Thanks Ginny," Harry said.

"You're welcome." She nodded.

The Twins went back to the room while Ginny, Harry, Ron, and Hermione decided to wander around the hospital. In the psyche ward Harry was practically attacked by a man claiming Harry to be some sort of demon while a nurse calmly sedated the man with her wand. They ran into Gildoroy Lockheart much to Ron's dismay and were ushered into the room taking unwanted autographs from the former celebrity. They ran into Neville while Lockhart was taking his meds and forced into sleep and learned firsthand the sad hard truth of the cruelty of the Cruciatus curse. Ron watched Neville's mother with a white face while he and his Grandmother explained what had happened. The quartet were silent after they bid the psyche ward goodbye.

"You did that to Lockheart with a broken wand," Ginny deadpanned in shock.

"And if he ever gets his memory back I'm screwed," Ron nodded just as in shock as she was.

"It's rather sad," Hermione commented, "He was the most popular Wizard for an entire year, and we're the only ones to ever visit him?"

"What about Neville?" Ginny asked quietly, "I never knew, did you guys...?"

Harry looked at the floor guiltily, "I learned about it from Dumbledore."

"We didn't know," Hermione said shaking her head.

Ginny frowned and looked back at the psyche ward, "You know what guys? Go without me. I'll catch up."

The trio nodded watching Ginny turn back to the psyche ward no doubt to talk to Neville. When they reached Mr. Weasley's room they found Remus and Tonks sitting and talking to another very upset patient and a couple of Healers surrounding Mr. Weasley's bed.

"It's tough with this particular wound," One said to Mrs. Weasley, "The venom will make it take twice as long as normal to close properly. But putting stitches in..." She glared at one of her colleagues, "Was not approved by the Warden so we'll have to re-close the wound all over again. He should be able to go home tomorrow."

Mrs. Weasley still had a dark frown on her face when her husband smiled at her but the Twins were grinning from amusement. They all left the ward, Minus Dumbledore, with Tonks and Remus keeping watch. Remus spoke quietly to Harry about the man they'd been talking too. He'd been bitten by a werewolf and so was infected with lycanthrope. Harry listened sympathetically and put a hand on Remus's shoulder in quiet support even if he didn't totally understand.

When they reached the Burrow Madam Pomfrey was there to make sure she could check his healing progress on schedule. Mrs. Weasley walked off to rant to the Grangers about Mr. Weasley's little 'experiment' in Muggle healing methods. They helped her calm down as she told her about what stitches were and the fact that they did

work for Muggles but maybe not for magical venom.

The other children feeling happier then that previous night played an exciting game of Exploding Snap in the kitchen while Madam Pomfrey poked and prodded Harry legs. She made him stand without his cane and walk a few inches without support. She caught him when he cried out in pain and fell. The game stopped as the others in the room looked at him in alarm.

"You haven't been practicing your exercises," Madam Pomfrey accused as she helped him sit down.

"I've been busy," Harry said with a wince.

Madam Pomfrey's expression darkened, "Mr. Potter, busy or not you need to be continuing your physical exercises to continue to improve the movement and strength in your legs. By all accounts your legs should have healed months ago! It is almost as if you feel you don't deserve to heal! The mind is half the battle in healing if you don't want to become fully healthy your magic won't let you become a hundred percent cured!"

Harry's jaw snapped shut and he frowned, "What do you mean my magic won't let me?" He asked.

Madam Pomfrey sighed, "Healing for wizards is very different from healing with Muggles. We have a different energy or life-force that protects us and plays a major role in healing us and allowing us to age so much more slowly than Muggles. Our minds and our emotions guide that ability. Your legs show a lot more progress than you're experiencing which is contradictory and makes very little medical sense!" She placed her hands on her hips, "So I must conclude that there is either something blocking your healing in your magic or that you simply feel on a subconscious level that you don't deserve to be cured."

"Maybe it isn't subconscious," Harry said quietly.

Madam Pomfrey's mouth dropped open in shock, "Mr. Potter--!"

Harry glared at her, "Maybe I have done things that don't deserve redemption! Maybe I deserve the punishment that my legs force on me. Maybe I'll never be cured!" He snapped fear and anger mixed in his emotions as he stood grabbing his cane and walking with it out of the room as quickly as his legs allowed.

The room was silent and Madam Pomfrey sat down, "Oh dear," She said with worry, "Maybe I said that wrong."

The children looked at each other, Ron and Hermione stared at the door in worry. Hermione detached herself from the group touching Ron's shoulder and looking at him pleadingly. He nodded and sat down pulling his family back to the game reluctantly while Madam Pomfrey sat and thought about what she may or may not have said.

Hermione found Harry on the ground in the study his chest heaving as he supported himself with his arms. The cane lay beside him untouched as his shoulders rose and shook. His body rose a few inches his legs shaking uncontrollably. He gasped in pain and fell with an angered and desperate cry.

"Damnit!" He snarled, "God damnit!"

His arms tensed again as he tried to push himself to his feet a second time. Hermione was frozen in her spot in the doorway as she watched a lump forming in her throat. He fell a second time and yelled in pain.

She was across the floor in seconds kneeling next to him and pulling him into her arms.

"Fuck," Harry gasped grabbing Hermione and digging his fingers into

the back of her shirt clutching her too him tightly, "Damnit. She's right," He sobbed, "She's fucking right."

Hermione closed her eyes as she held him.

"I deserve this," Harry gabbled on, "I deserve to feel pain for all the crimes I committed. I deserve this. I don't want to be crippled."

"You don't," Hermione said burying her fingers in the back of his hair, "It was self defense."

"It wasn't," Harry cried, "I hunted them, as they hunted me. I hunted down my pursuers, I killed them, brutally! Burning them alive. Like witches at the stake!" He spat disgustedly, "I hate them, all of them for what they did to me. For what they live to do. I'm just as bad as him."

"Stop it," Hermione cried, "This is pointless! What happened over the summer..." She pulled away from him so she could look at him at arm's length, "You did what you had to do! You're not a monster Harry; you never could be. Your self-hatred is proof of that!"

"I should have died Hermione," Harry said quietly, "So many times, I should have died."

"But you didn't." Hermione said quietly, "and I--," She looked away from him dropping her hands to her sides and slumped, "I never would have forgiven you if you died. If you...left me."

"Hermione...?" Harry asked.

Her head shot up and pure determined fire lit her eyes, "You don't deserve this. So don't you dare believe that."

"Then why aren't I--?" Harry began.

"Healing?" Hermione asked, "I don't know. But I know it's not because of that."

"Even if you say it Hermione, doesn't change the guilt I feel the memory...or the blood on my hands," He chuckled darkly, "I'm fifteen. This is wrong and I know it. It's all fucked up."

"Yeah," Hermione sighed looking up at the doorway where Ron stood uncertainly watching, "It all is. I wish we could be eleven again. But we can't can we?"

Ron turned away and walked away from the door silently deciding not to enter and not to acknowledge he'd just seen Harry at one of his weakest moments. The vision of him trying to rise and blaming himself would haunt the redhead for a while.

"Innocence," Harry sighed, "I miss it."

"Come here then," Hermione held out her arms and Harry gratefully fell back into her embrace, "Let's try to stay children, while we still can."

Harry nodded closing his eyes. She stroked her fingers through his air and leaned her head against his own. There had been a lot of stress that day. A lot of fear and uncertainty. The boy in her arms always took everything upon himself as though all the wrong in the world was his responsibility. He must have been tired. She let him drift away from her arms to her lap lying on the cold grey wood floor of the Grimmauld manor.

She waited for Ron and he didn't disappoint entering the room when he sensed Harry was asleep. He sat down next to her and took her hand in his own with a tired sigh.

"You always do this," He said quietly, "Look after us."

"You two give me no choice the way you attract trouble," Hermione said quietly.

"Thank you," Ron said quietly.

"I expect good Christmas presents from both of you," Hermione grinned, "Nothing useless you hear me?"

Ron rolled his eyes, "Of course 'Mione."

"Good," Hermione smiled, "I hope there's a library in this place."

Ron rolled his eyes, "What is it with you and libraries?"

"I need to start researching Wizard injuries, for my own piece of mind," She said quietly, "What Madam Pomfrey said disturbs me."

Ron nodded, "Yeah, it disturbs me too." He looked at Harry, "He's a frustrating one."

"Yeah," Hermione smiled and squeezed Ron's hand, "But he's our best friend and we love him right?"

"Yeah," Ron sighed, "We do."

"We love you too you know," Hermione said tipping her head so that she could get a better look into his eyes.

Ron blushed and looked away embarrassed, "Yeah, I know that too."

"Good," Hermione said.

The smiled a little at each other and settled for a wait. Sirius Black found the three later that evening. All of them were asleep with Hermione sitting leaning against the wall, Ron leaning his head on Hermione's shoulder his arms around her shoulders and Harry

sleeping in Hermione's lap. All in all Sirius dearly wished he had a camera for blackmail purposes only and laid a dusty blanket over the trio deciding to tell Molly to leave some food in the cold box for them to re-heat later. They deserved the rest.

So a bit of Fluff at the end I suppose. Didn't mean to do it, just happened. I love how the character development has taken a life of its own in this story despite my initial plans for it. The type of relationships that are developing between the characters is not where I first wanted to go but I can accept it based on how they have developed. Hermione and Harry in particular. I know I sort of sped up the whole Hospital experience but I really felt it needed to be done as such and hope I can again be forgiven. The reason for the legs being as they are will be explained very soon, thank you all for your patience. Hope you enjoyed it!

-Red

Oh These Hallowed Halls

Ron marveled as he woke up at the peaceful silence of his mind. He couldn't recall a night where he hadn't dreamt in ages. He wondered belatedly if it had something to do with the fact that he'd had too little sleep in the last two days or if perhaps it had to do with the two warm bodies next to him. In either case he didn't want to move and he fought the thoughts that were slowly drifting into his mind...a sure sign of wakefulness. As the thoughts in his mind became more lucid and faster moving he cracked a single eye open in surrender.

High dusty windows cast cut-out lights on the grey walls and bookshelves in the Grimmuald study. A cherry wood desk loomed upward from the ground on the other side of Hermione's head. The girl in question was sleeping soundly with her mouth dropped open like a fish and her bushy hair fluffed all around her. Ron smirked a little realizing a bit of drool was gathered at the edge of her mouth where a white drool trail fell down her jaw.

Harry wasn't much better off Ron noted. His hair was a matted mess some of it matted to his forehead from sweat. But where Hermione had drool Harry had a silly grin plastered on his face in his sleep and he twitched. Ron put a hand to his mouth to hide the snicker that was threatening to come out. It would be sooo easy to use this moment as an opportunity for blackmail.

Ron sat up and immediately wished he hadn't. His whole back down to his arms and up his neck was dreadfully sore from sleeping on the hard wooden ground. Sure there was an ancient rug beneath him but it had very little width to it and seemed so matted with dust that it may as well have been stone. He went about sitting up the rest of the way stretching slowly to push past the sharp pain in his muscles.

He felt Harry beside him tense. Ron looked away from him remembering yesterday seeing for the first time the suffering he held behind walls of jokes and sarcasm. Harry had always been so strong

to Ron. It had shaken Ron to see him so emotionally weak.

"When did you join the floor mites?" Harry asked hoarsely from the floor smiling at Ron quietly.

"A while after you fell asleep," Ron lied.

Harry frowned, "You saw me then." He said quietly, "And before you lie again know that I don't really think...I guess I don't...well,"

"I know Harry," Ron said quietly, "Truth is, I always thought it strange, the way you acted as though nothing was ever wrong even though even after the shit you went through."

"I envy you," Harry said quietly startling Ron into jumping and staring at Harry with his mouth agape.

"You what?" Ron asked, "Why?"

Harry rolled back over opting not to look at Ron as he spoke about something so personal. He buried his head against Hermione's side and she unconsciously moved her arm so he could do so.

"You're so lucky," He said quietly, "You have an amazing family, even with Percy being a prick. You can be upset by things; you can show anger and hatred freely. You may not be happy now but you're strong. You have no one expecting you to smile and act calm when things get bad. And your still, well, you don't carry blood on your hands do you."

Ron was silent, it was strange hearing Harry say he envied Ron when Ron had envied Harry for so long. He looked at his bandaged arm and then at Harry. Slowly he unwound the bandages and let the white cloth fall to the ground silently. He placed his hand on Harry's shoulder and Harry looked at the hand startled then looked again. He turned quickly grabbing Ron's hand then his arm and pulling it down

to him to stare at it closely.

"Ron," He said hoarsely, "Is this what--? 'I shall not' what?" He hissed.

"The fact is Harry," Ron said quietly, "I do have blood on my hands, my own blood. I've killed Umbridge in my head in so many different ways its sick. When really I was just slowly killing myself." Ron looked away from Harry as Harry slowly let Ron's arm drop, "The fact is that you make me strong. You know what pain is but you don't let it cripple you like I do. You fight the pain whereas I—I almost like it." He whispered that last bit fearfully as if saying it out loud would make it true, "And you, you're my brother. You have a family Harry," He looked at Harry again, "It's my family. You're a Weasley even if your name is 'Potter'."

Harry, unable to say anything grabbed Ron's hand again clasping it in his own, "You and Hermione give me strength too." He said quietly.

"Good," Ron said, "Then we do our jobs as friends."

Harry shook his head, "As brothers." He said resolutely.

Ron grinned, "Yeah."

"I hope I'm not categorized as a 'brother'." Hermione stated groggily, "That would be quite the blow to my femininity."

"Femininity?" Ron grinned over at her, "What femininity?"

"If you weren't so far away," She warned, "I'd hit you."

"So does this mean I have to dye my hair a bright Weasley red?" Harry asked as he slowly stretched.

"I don't actually think there's a dye out there that could give you that

color," Hermione said rolling over on her side to face the two boys.

Ron shook his head, "And even if there were," He grinned, "Who the bloody hell would want it?"

"Besides Harry," Hermione grinned wickedly, "Your black hair defines your Emo personality. We wouldn't want you any other way."

Harry stuck his tongue out at Hermione playfully. Hermione laughed and ruffled his hopeless hair. Harry slowly sat up and winced rubbing his back.

"First I sleep on a cushionless chair, then the floor," Harry sighed, "There was a time this wouldn't bother me. I must be going soft."

"Or your getting old," Ron grinned, "There's that too Mate."

Harry rolled his eyes, "Fifteen going on fifty. Brilliant."

It was Hermione's turn to stretch and sit up, "Well," Hermione grinned, "I feel fine. I'm going to go see who else is up and if there's anything to eat. I'm starving."

She stood up and strode out of the room with Harry and Ron staring after her.

"That's a rare sight," Harry commented.

"Yeah," Ron nodded, "She hasn't had a shower yet. Where the bloody hell is all of that energy coming from? And why the hell is it Hermione that's the energetic one?"

"It's a useless question to ask." Harry shrugged, "Only the fates would be able to answer it."

Harry called his cane to him and slowly went about the task of trying

to stand. Ron watched him struggle with his legs until he fell back with a huff and a sigh.

"Ron," Harry said with an embarrassed flush of the cheeks, "Would you mind--?"

Ron forced a smile, "Yeah," he said quietly and stood giving Harry his hand.

He pulled Harry up to a standing position and steadied him as the boy wobbled. When he was sure Harry had control of his balance he backed off allowing Harry to stretch his legs slowly.

"Uh—thanks," Harry said grinning sheepishly.

Ron rolled his eyes, "No thanks are necessary. We're brothers, idiot."

The next few days were spent with sporadic shifts in the hospital with Mr. Weasley. Helping the Grangers decorate the house for Christmas, and cleaning some more of the Grimmauld Mansions old rooms making them habitable once again. Harry met Sirius's house elf and was nearly 'banished' from the premises until Sirius bellowed at Kreacher that Harry was indeed a human and not some Phantom bent on haunting his precious 'mistresses' home; a fact which the twins took great amusement in exploiting.

The day when Mr. Weasley got to come home had all of the children preparing the house for his arrival. Grimmauld Manor was hardly recognizable by the time all of the Christmas decorations were finally in place. Harry sat between Sirius and Remus sharing a pint of butterbeer with them. Tonks was in the Kitchen helping Mrs. Granger cook the welcome back feast they had planned for Mr. Weasley. Harry and Sirius repeatedly found themselves roaring with laughter every time Tonks made a beautiful mess of things with her clumsiness. It became even funnier when Remus jumped in to help her only to make the messes larger.

Commotion at the front door alerted those in the Kitchen that Mrs. Weasley had returned with Mr. Weasley. The rest of the evening was spent in laughter as Mr. Weasley told them about what he went through with the healers and his little "stitches" experiment.

"Now it may work wonderfully for you Muggles," He told the Grangers, "But as far as magical snakes are concerned I really was better off without it. In the end they gave me Lover's Tears in order to get the wounds to close properly."

"Lover's Tears?" Harry asked looking up quickly from the mind game he and Ron were playing with their utensils, "The potion?"

"Yes," Mr. Weasley smiled, "I didn't think you'd know it. They aren't supposed to teach students at your level about it yet."

"They didn't," Harry shook his head suddenly interested, "Madam Sinistra was teaching it to me as a way to understand what happens when you make a mistake. She said there were few who could brew it properly."

"There are," Mr. Weasley nodded, "St. Mungos gets it imported from a Potions Master in Scotland. They have a limited supply so they only use it on the people they believe to be the most positive minded. They don't want to waste it on someone who might not wish to be cured."

"What do you mean by that?" Hermione asked interest piqued as well.

"It's all about intent," Arthur explained, "Both by the person brewing the potion and the person taking the potion. In order to be brewed properly both the brewer and the patient have to really want to be cured. Otherwise it's a failure."

"And if brewed perfectly by someone who wants with all their being for the patient to be cured then if the patient wants with all their being to be cured," Harry continued his eyes alight, "It's said it doesn't matter the ailment, the patient can be brought back from the brink of death."

Hermione's eyebrows rose, "They used something so potent on you?"

"That last bit is a myth," Mr. Weasley smiled, "It's just a potion that works better when both sides are believers in positive thinking. It's not nearly so powerful."

"Hmm," Jane Granger said thoughtfully, "I wonder. Most Myths are based in truth. So where did the Myth about the potion come from."

"A story," Mrs. Weasley smiled.

"Oh it's that potion!" Ginny said, "The Lover's Tears is a story Mum used to tell me!" She grinned, "It's about a witch who had a Muggle lover. She wanted to tell him about the fact she was a witch but the muggle lover was drafted into a war. She pined after him fearing and waiting desperately for the day he would come home to her and so when she got the letter that said he was on his way she was both frightened and elated."

"But she waited weeks and weeks and no sign of him came to her," Mrs. Weasley nodded to her daughter with a smile, "So she decided she would find him herself. Not knowing what awaited her when she found him she packed very few belongings and set off for a journey that took months. When she did find him he was buried beneath leaves under a tree and she feared he was dead."

Harry Hermione and the Grangers listened to the story with rapt attention while the rest of the table moved on and continued their previous conversations. Most in the room had all ready heard of it

and so had no reason to listen to it again.

"He wasn't dead," Mrs. Weasley continued amidst the din of conversation, "He was holding onto life by the edge of a thread. Fearing she had little time the witch scoured the forest and found five ingredients. Four of which could be a poison if used correctly. She despaired she'd be unable to brew anything with the unlikely ingredients to help her save her lover. Her fear for his life over-rode her common sense and she tried to brew a potion that would save him anyway.

The first try met with a complete lack of any improvement, though there was nothing more wrong. The second day she tried again cutting and placing the ingredients in a different order. Now this was a time when witches were prosecuted by the Church and all Muggles hated and feared Witches and Wizards so she had been afraid of losing lover which is why she had waited to tell him what she was. That fear of rejection went into the potion. Because of this the second brew had the opposite effect; he immediately broke out in fever.

Her desperation for him to live heightened and became so powerful that she brewed the potion a third time this time mixing her tears and love and need for him to live. It is said the tears added with moonlight made the potion light up the field in an ethereal glow and when she administered the potion she was so exhausted by putting all of her being into the brew that she collapsed beside him.

She awoke the next morning to the kiss of her healed lover. So healed was he that not even a scratch existed upon his skin. When she asked how he lived he explained he had known without a doubt that he needed to live so that he could be with her again. When she cried and told him she was a witch and that she'd saved his life with magic he embraced her and prayed to his god in thanks that she had been given to him. The potion was later written down by her to be used by other people and has been called 'Lover's Tears'." Mrs. Weasley finished, "We're not certain that the story and the potion

used in clinics is the same but that's where the name comes from any ways."

"It's a lovely story," Mrs. Granger smiled.

"It's a sappy story that's what it is," Ron grinned winking at Ginny who scowled and elbowed him.

"Do all Wizard potions have stories like that?" Harry nodded.

"Certainly not," Mr. Weasley laughed, "But some do. They are tools taught to children so that they understand at an early age that with potions not everything can be done correctly the first time and if it's done incorrectly it can have disastrous effects."

"That was what Madam Sinistra was trying to do when she showed me that one different ingredient could create a poison." Harry said.

"Or one wrong intent," Mr. Weasley nodded, "It's a good lesson to learn. Fortunately for me, I have a rather positive disposition and a lot to live for. So I benefitted from the potion. The healers worried my wound would never close without it."

"It's why we love you," Mrs. Weasley said fondly placing her hands on his shoulder.

Mr. Weasley smiled and grasped her hands with his own. Harry looked away embarrassed while the table erupted in obnoxious groans and cat calls. Sirius and Remus laughed along with Mr. and Mrs. Granger and the rest of the meal was light and loud.

When they all filed up to their respective beds the children parting according to sex Harry thought he sort of finally understood what Madam Sinistra and Madam Pomfrey had been trying to tell him without accusing him of doing it. He had been right, he didn't feel he deserved to be cured. But he did feel he deserved to protect himself

and to protect those he loved. Was that enough reason to live for?

"Hey Ron," Harry nudged the semi-sleeping boy's back from across the beds with his cane.

"What?" Ron grunted, "I'm trying to sleep."

"What do you live for?" Harry asked curious.

Ron didn't answer instead he rolled over on his other side so he could face and look at Harry, "I live for life," He answered after a while spent roving his eyes over Harry's face inquisitively.

"Huh," Harry said stumped by his answer.

"Well?" Ron asked, "I shared, what about you?"

"I—I'm not sure," Harry said, "There're a lot of things but I'm not sure which one I live for, you know?"

Ron shook his head, "Tell you what," He said, "When you figure out your answer...Let me know. All right?"

Harry nodded, "All right."

"Good," Ron said, "Now go to sleep." He turned back around his back facing Harry and settled down to sleep.

Harry grinned a little. It was so like Ron to pick the most simple yet most complicated answer to his question. It was funny in a way and comforting to know that after all Ron had gone through he'd still choose such a reason to go on. Harry placed his hands behind his head watching the ceiling. Slowly he drifted off to sleep feeling that maybe he should strive to simplify his answer too.

Hermione awoke with someone grabbing her shoulder and shaking. Her brown eyes snapped open and she turned grabbing her wand from beneath her pillow. Light illuminated the end of her wand at a silent suggestion and Ronald Weasley flinched back away from her light shielding his eyes.

"Hermione!" He hissed, "It's just me! Bloody hell."

"Ron," Hermione's wand winked out and she looked over at Ginny's sleeping form, "What are you doing here?" She hissed, "It's the middle of the night!"

"I know," Ron hissed, "Just, well...come here." He beckoned that she follow him.

Hermione frowned and rolled out of bed following Ron out of the room she softly shut the door behind her, "Well?" She whispered.

"I've been thinking," Ron said quietly, "There are a few things I can't get out of my head. That story Mum was telling being one of them."

"Does this have a point?" Hermione asked, "Because I'm not very responsive when I'm half asleep."

"I know," Ron said rubbing his temples, "You're downright nasty until you've got your shower. Will you just listen for a minute?"

Hermione crossed her arms and leaned back on the door waving her hand and nodding in a "go on" motion. Ron sighed and leaned back against the railing looking over his shoulder to the down stairs entryway.

"He said he doesn't believe he should be cured but I don't know if that's really the case," Ron said, "I think he just wants to feel guilty now but that he'll change his mind one day."

"Ron," Hermione deadpanned, "This is Harry. He takes everything wrong with the world personally. That is never going to change."

"He asked me a question," Ron said, "And then went to sleep while I stayed up thinking about it, the little bleater," The corner of Hermione's mouth twitched, "But that isn't the point. The point is I think we need to learn how to brew that potion. Properly. There are no two people on this planet that want Harry to be healthy more than you and I."

"But Ron," Hermione said, "He needs to want to heal. Even if we did brew the potion, perfectly even! Which at our current levels I sincerely doubt we could...How can we guarantee it will work?"

"Surely if our intent is that great it wouldn't matter," Ron said his eyes pleading with Hermione to agree with him.

Hermione sighed her eyes growing sad, "That's not how the potion works Ron. I was reading about it before bed." She looked at him and smiled softly, "Probably having the same thoughts as you, but there have been cases, awful ones where people have nearly given their magic to save a person only to have the person die because their will to live wasn't strong enough. The story is pretty one, but it's a Myth."

Ron turned from her resting his palms on the railing and leaning his weight on it while he bowed his head, "I just wish there was something I could do," He said.

The image of yesterday, the moment Harry was at his weakest played again and again in Ron's mind. Hermione looked away from Ron remembering Harry's words as well. She pushed off the door and walked up to Ron placing a hand on his shoulder. He turned his head to look at her the sad smile she wore in the blue light of the darkened house looked gaunt.

"It seems cruel that we love him sometimes doesn't it?" Hermione asked.

"Hey I don't! It's not like that--!" Ron began.

"I know Ron," Hermione smiled a little larger and shook her head, "Must you always jump to conclusions? What I meant to say was its cruel that all we can do is sit by and watch isn't it?"

Ron nodded relaxing against the banister, "Yeah," Ron said.

"With all this magic you'd think there'd be something else we could do," Hermione sighed, "But it seems even Magic has its limits."

"We still...could you know," Ron said, "Just in case. And in the mean time help Harry heal the old fashioned way."

Hermione smiled glancing at Ron out of the corner of her eye, "Now that, Ron, that's a brilliant idea."

Ron grinned, "I have my moments."

Hermione smiled more brightly looking at the wall, "Didn't your Mum say we were going into town tomorrow?" She asked after a long bout of silence.

"Yeah," Ron nodded, "We're splitting up to go Christmas shopping."

"Then I'm going back to bed." Hermione declared, "We can talk about this later."

Ron nodded, "Good night then."

"Good night," Hermione waved and quietly stole back into her room.

Ron watched the tail end of her robe disappear into the dark room.

He tilted his head back feeling better even if he knew that his plan may never work. After a few moments of silence spent in contemplation, he too went back to bed glancing once at Harry who was sleeping in the throes of a nightmare his face contorted in fear and his arms wrapped around himself in a fetal position. No noise was escaping his lips this night, a rarity, but sweat was still matted to his forehead and he still shivered as though cold even though Ron knew if he touched him his skin would be scalding hot.

Ron went to bed feeling that he could indeed be useful and with that thought fell into a pleasant sleep.

Diagon Alley was as busy as it ever was four days before Christmas. Witches and Wizards of all stations, sizes and appearances covered the cobbled stone streets in search of special gifts for each of their loved ones. Robes existed everywhere one looked and Ronald Weasley watched them all with only a slight amount of confusion. He knew these streets well being born into a Wizarding family he'd traveled the Alley more than once in his life which is precisely why he was guiding two Muggles, a shaggy haired brown mutt, his best friend, and a boy that looked far too much like her for either of their tastes'.

Ron grinned at the boy and he scowled back tense and on edge. His dull brown eyes darted around at the multitude of people around them. The hands in his pockets were clenched tight creating two awkward bulges out of the side of his jeans. Hermione watched him worriedly while Ron was more bemused.

"Henry," He grinned, "Relax, no one could possibly recognize you."

The boy 'Henry' grunted unamused, "Too crowded," He muttered.

The dog beside him gave him a low whine that earned a raised

eyebrow from the nervous boy.

"Even Snuffles thinks your over-reacting," Ron prodded, "It's Diagon Alley, no one would try anything here."

Slowly 'Henry' leveled Ron with a long dark look, his right eye gleaming a little brighter than his left with a golden edge peaking out behind the dull brown.

"When it's crowded like this no one will hear a scream," 'Henry' replied, "No one will notice a quiet struggle by a wall or doorway. People in mass are oblivious to their surroundings Ron." His voice chilled the four people he walked with.

Ed and Jane Granger exchanged a careful look, "I think you're over-reacting," Ed said, "You're with two adults, Muggles we may be but we are dressed enough like Wizards to look like them. In a street this crowded no one will notice us for what we are and wouldn't dare touch a few kids with their 'Wizard' parents."

"It will be ok Henry," Jane smiled, "We'll get our shopping done quickly then leave as soon as possible."

'Henry' nodded, "I'm just nervous," He admitted with a sigh, "The last time I was in a place with so many people wasn't a good experience. I guess I'm just a bit jumpy."

"A bit?" Ron asked incredulously, "Check yourself in the next window Mate. 'Jumpy' doesn't even begin to cover it." It was more like he looked ready to murder anyone that came within four feet of his person but Ron didn't tell him that, "Come on," Ron grinned, "Let's go get ourselves a Butterbeer while the adults finish up in here."

"Oh yes Ron," 'Henry' rolled his eyes, "Let's leave the adults that are supposedly the sole reason for our protection. That'll make me feel loads better."

"He gets testy when he's nervous," Ron grinned at Hermione, "Have you noticed that?"

"Cranky is more like it," Hermione nodded, "He's just upset because we didn't let him have his beauty sleep this morning. A Butterbeer will help I think." She laced an arm around the crook of 'Henry's' arm and began to lead him away from her parents.

"I'm not cranky," 'Henry' protested feebly as he let Hermione propel him forward awkwardly, "And I don't want a drink."

"Oh but you need one," Ron said with a grin, "A drink would do you wonders. Maybe we could change your glamour so you'd look seventeen."

"Why would I want to look seventeen?" 'Henry' asked with a sigh after realizing he wouldn't be getting out of going to the nearest pub.

"Firewhisky mate," Ron grinned, "Why else?"

The scraggly brown haired dog that followed them gave the most un-dog-like chuckle causing Ron's grin to widen.

"Looks like 'Snuffles' agrees with me." Ron said smugly.

"Ok," Henry drawled, "Yes, let's give firewhisky to the boy who's combustible. Sounds brilliant."

"Oi," Ron said his voice filled with 'hurt', "Why do you have to be so mean when all we're doing is trying to help you relax?"

'Henry' snorted in disbelief, "More like you want to see what happens if I get smashed."

Hermione and Ron grinned at each other completely without guilt at

being caught.

"Don't you think maybe the Pub has ways of knowing whether or not its patrons are of drinking age despite Glamour charms?" 'Henry' asked as Devil's Advocate.

"I all ready have that covered," Hermione smiled innocently.

'Henry' groaned.

They entered a pub on the other side of the street. Filled to the brim with Witches and Wizards out having a 'merry moment' before plunging back into the stressful hunt for the perfect present made finding a place to sit difficult. Eventually the trio opted to sit outside at one of the small round tables on the deck much to 'Henry's' relief. Ron soon disappeared into the crowded din of the pub to get their drinks as Hermione, 'Henry' and 'Snuffles' sat outside to watch the passerby bustling along their way.

"All right," Hermione said with a smile, "Out with it then, what is it that's got you all knotted up?"

"I told you," 'Henry' muttered, "I don't like crowds."

"Is that all?" Hermione asked in a way that told Henry she didn't believe it, "Not to be rude but every time someone bumped in to you today you seemed ready to curse them. Mum and Dad were worried you might, which would blow any cover you might have about being my 'Muggle cousin'. You need to calm down."

"How should I calm down when every instinct in me is telling me to flee?" 'Henry' muttered.

Hermione sighed exasperated as Ron appeared with a grin placing three large pints of Butterbeer down on the table. He gave Hermione and 'Henry' their change and grabbed one of the pints before sitting

himself.

"It's a madhouse in there," Ron said with a grin, "A bloody insane asylum. Apparently you're not the only one in a foul mood Mate," He toasted Harry with his pint before sloshing some of the sweet liquid down.

A clack went unheard as 'Henry' moved his hand by the side of the table as though he were leaning something against it before he grabbed a pint himself. Upon bringing the Butter beer to his lips the young man was amazed at how good it tasted to him despite his current stress. Ron and Hermione watched with amusement as 'Henry' slowly chugged the pint of Butterbeer ignoring the world in favor of the slightly alcoholic, highly sweet beverage. When he was done he dropped the cup to the table opened his arms with a grin then leaned back in his seat almost relaxed.

"Who said he didn't want to come to the pub?" Ron asked 'Snuffles'.

The scraggly dog snickered and 'Henry' rolled his eyes.

"You two need to hurry it up so we can get out of here quickly," He said tapping his index finger on his bare wrist.

"Oh like we really believe you chugged that whole thing just to hurry us along," Hermione said with a grin, "You'd still have to wait for us to finish regardless." She smirked leaning back lazily in her seat nursing her mug in her hands and blowing slowly on the top of the hot beverage mockingly.

"Relax Mate," Ron grinned, "We have to wait till everyone else is done with their shopping. I doubt you're done with getting everyone's presents."

"Actually," 'Henry' grinned, "I am."

"Liar," Ron grinned, "We've been with you all day. There's no way you could have gotten our presents without one of us seeing."

'Henry' raised a pair of brown eyebrows and gazed levelly at Ron his eyes shining in mirth, "There isn't?" He asked, "Are we not Wizards Mr. Weasley?"

Ron's mouth dropped open for a minute then closed and he glared at the brown haired boy in front of him, "You're bluffing," He looked at Hermione, "He's bluffing, he has to be."

Hermione gave Ron a confused look, "You mean you're not done?" She asked innocently, "I finished my shopping an hour ago."

The dog lying beside Harry's feet barked out a laugh at Ron's flabbergasted face. 'Henry' and Hermione's lips twitched as they tried not to laugh at their friend.

"Loony, the both of you," Ron muttered staring into his mug, "There's no way you could have, but then they could have..." He continued muttering to his Butterbeer as 'Henry' and Hermione continued laughing at him, "Oi, all right!" Ron snapped slamming his mug on the table sloshing warm Butterbeer onto his fingers, "I'm not done yet so what? Oi, stop laughing you two!"

'Henry' leaned his head on his arms as he continued to laugh his shoulders bouncing the table. Hermione hugged her mug to her chest her head thrown back over the chair's back and her legs drawn up as she squealed her amusement. Ron looked angrily from one friend to the next clutching his mug on the table before their infectious laughter broke through his annoyance and he slowly smiled.

"So glad to know I entertain you two," He said with a grin and a roll of the eyes, "So if you two are done shopping you won't mind if I run off to finish my bit will you?"

'Henry' and Hermione grinned at him as they calmed down, "No," Hermione smiled then giggled, "Though it's no mystery who you're shopping for is it?"

Ron rolled his eyes, "Obviously."

'Henry' and Hermione laughed again at this and Ron put down his Butterbeer with a sigh.

"I'll be right back," He hopped over the low fence that separated the pub from the street and disappeared into the crowd.

'Henry' shook his head with a grin, "How long does he expect us to wait here?" He asked.

Hermione shrugged, "With Ron?" She grinned and the two shared a knowing chuckle.

She leaned back again her knees resting against the table comfortably. She watched the passerby in their multitude of colorful robes and strange pointed hats. A small smile played on her pink lips and 'Henry' wondered what she thought as she watched the Witches and Wizards bustling along. She held her mug balanced on her knees her frizzy hair was pulled back in a low pony tail but long strands fell about her face like zigzag wisps of brown spider web.

"There really isn't any place like this," She said with a fond smile, "Five years have passed since I found out I was a Witch, and I still can't believe I belong to this world."

'Henry' smiled, "Yeah," He said his eyes turning to watch the crowd with a different feeling, "I need to start wearing sunglasses whenever I come here," He sighed.

"Huh?" Hermione asked intelligently tearing her gaze from the sights

to look at her friend, "Why?"

'Henry' pointed at his right eye and the brown flashed gold for a second, "Some of the things in the shop windows," He began ticking his list with his fingers, "Then the charms surrounding the shops and the magic on the streets and the auras of the people...I can't even look at Gringots head on. It's ridiculous." He said rolling his eyes skyward with a dramatic sigh.

Hermione shook her head with a smile, "I can only imagine," She said with a grin, "Tell you what when we get back to headquarters we'll work on how we can dim the intensity a little. It'll be tricky, you can see spells and I doubt that's what you want directly in front of your eyes...hmmm..." She sipped her Butterbeer in thought the wheels in her head turning the problem over and over.

'Henry' smiled fondly recognizing her 'problem solving' look and knowing she'd open a book the minute she got back to Grimmauld place. He shook his head bemused and glanced down at the dog resting at his feet. The mutt's ears were twitching listening to the various sounds even as his eyes were closed and his snout rested on his paws. 'Henry' stretched lazily as his best friend thought about his plight and his 'dog' rested.

He looked around the pub watching the witches and Wizards inside converse, argue, and laugh together. He recognized a few of his classmates in the din. Most of them were with family only conversing when they could pull away from their relatives.

A splash of white blond caught his eye and he narrowed his eyes as he recognized Draco Malfoy standing bored in a corner while his mother clad from head to toe in garments of mourning sat and conversed with a few other upstanding looking witches. The boy kept one eye on his mother another on his surroundings. He didn't seem to notice the 'brown haired muggle boy' outside the door watching him. 'Henry' winced and turned his gaze away from the widowed

mother feeling a twinge of guilt twisting his stomach.

Movement to 'Henry's' right alerted him to his red head friend vaulting back over the fence a small silver bag no larger than his palm clutched in his hand and a large grin planted over his lips.

"Told you I'd be back soon," He said grinning and plopping into his chair, "I'm done," He smirked proudly.

'Henry' leaned an elbow on the table resting his chin in his hand, "Congratulations," He drawled.

Ron punched his shoulder and 'Henry' grinned taking the light-hearted smack with good nature.

"What's got you all concentrated?" Ron asked Hermione noticing the fact she hadn't noticed his entrance.

"Thinking," Hermione said absently, "And you do know that bag is from the Broom store don't you?"

Ron looked startled and shoved the little bag into his pant pocket, "It is not," He said with a pout.

Hermione looked heavenward as she brought her Butterbeer up to her lips, "Of course not," She said agreeably sipping her drink, "Wherever would I get such an idea?"

Ron frowned, "It's not for you anyways." He said then quickly glared at 'Henry', "It's not for you either," He said quickly.

'Henry' held up his hands and shook his head in a pacifying gesture, "I didn't say it was," He grinned, "Might of thought it though. So what did you get me?"

"Like I'm telling you idiot," Ron said rolling his eyes, "What were you

two up to while I was away?"

"Because you were 'away' for sooo long," Hermione lamented dramatically.

"Shut it," Ron grinned.

She stuck her tongue out at him causing 'Henry' to chuckle at their childish antics.

"Just enjoying the view," He said answering Ron's question glancing back at the pub where Draco and his mother no longer were.

He shook his head feeling disorientated with all of the magic and people surrounding them. It was a wonder he was able to pinpoint his two best friends out of the mess at all.

"What view?" Ron asked incredulously, "All I see are people, everywhere."

'Henry' rolled his eyes and looked at Hermione, "It's a Muggle-born thing ok?"

Ron shrugged, "I'll take your word for it, hey," He said changing the topic, "I saw Ginny and told her where we were. She said she'd spread the word so that the others will meet us here." He nodded at Hermione, "Your parents are with her meeting up with my parents to do a bit of last minute stuff before they come get us so...I was wondering if there was anything else we wanted to do before leaving?"

"Sweet shop?" Hermione asked as a way of killing time.

'Henry' winced as he looked at the crowded streets, "Another Butterbeer?" He asked.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other and nodded slowly, "I could do with another Butterbeer," Hermione said slowly.

"So could I," Ron nodded, "This one's grown cold."

"Brilliant," 'Henry' grinned fishing out money.

He stood seeming to clutch air as he wobbled a bit steadying himself with the table.

"Uh-uh," Hermione shook her head, "You are not getting our drinks. You'd only spill them. Sit back down. I'll go this time."

'Henry' frowned disappointed but sat down handing her his money. He watched her disappear into the pub to order.

Ron watched his eyes follow her, "So what'd you get her?" He asked.

"A couple books I know she wanted," He said, "You?"

"A couple books?" Ron asked, "That's it?" He shook his head, "After everything she does for you that's all you could think of?"

"Oi, I'd like to see you do better," Henry said defensively.

"I did," Ron said with a smug grin, "Ginny helped me get it."

'Henry' nodded, "Ah," He said, "So you didn't just 'run into' her."

Ron shrugged, "Does it matter?" He asked.

"Not really," 'Henry' smirked, "Just making sure I was right."

Hermione came back distributing change and cups as she sat down, "What were you right about?" She asked.

"Snuffles has flees," 'Henry' grinned at "Snuffles' indignant snort of disbelief.

"Molly won't like hearing that," Hermione frowned, "We'll have to get some treatment before we get back to Headquarters."

Snuffles leapt up with a yelp in protest. 'Henry' burst out laughing at the thought of his Godfather having to take a flea bath. Said dog growled at 'Henry' as the boy laughed at his seriously taken joke.

Ron grinned at Hermione's confused look, "He doesn't have flees 'Mione," He smirked, "But maybe we should get some flea treatment just in case."

Snuffles had had enough, he leapt onto Ron's lap barking as the boy yelped and tried to push him off. Hermione and 'Henry' laughed hard at Ron's discomfort. Passing Witches and Wizards shook their heads in disapproval as they passed by and the hostess of the pub came out to tell them off for keeping the rowdy dog un-leashed. All too soon the rest of the Weasleys and Grangers gathered around the trio. They too indulged in some drinks and merriment before deciding it was time to bid goodbye to Diagon Alley and head back to Grimmauld place. By then the sun was beginning to set and the streets were emptying. The large group called the night bus to go to a few streets away from their destination and walked home feeling relieved and happy that their shopping for the holiday was over with.

Wrappings and Mirrors

"Damnit Ron, move your leg."

"I can't. Maybe if you moved your leg I'd be able to move mine!"

"Will you both please just move? I can't breathe!"

"If he gets off me I will."

"If he moves his stupid leg I can."

Ginny Weasley raised an eyebrow as she stood in the doorway to Ron and Harry's bedroom looking down on the infamous trio. One hand was poised on the door frame her body leaning its weight upon it and her other hand rested on her hip. Her shadow made a strange twisted blotch on the bright yellow light that streamed into the room from the open doorway cutting Hermione's head in the darkness off from the neck and making it nearly impossible to see the rest of Ron who was draped over Harry and Hermione in the opposite direction of the door.

"You are soooo lucky I'm not one of the Twins," Ginny drawled.

Harry looked up from beneath Ron's knee with a wide Grin, "Ginny! Brilliant, could you turn on the light switch?"

Ginny lazily lifted the arm she'd been resting on her hip and flicked the side of the wall. A soft click was heard and light flooded the room revealing more fully the tangled mess Hermione, Ron, and Harry had somehow found themselves in.

"Christmas wrapping gone wrong?" She asked her eyes taking in the multitude of wrapping paper covering the floor and the ribbons and tape that were generally tangled around the trio binding them together.

"More like Christmas wrapping spell gone wrong," Hermione huffed from beneath the two boys her face held at an awkward angle against the floor, "Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum decided to make a test out of who could wrap presents the fastest with magic."

Ginny's other eyebrow joined the first in its arched state, "They're underage." She stated.

"And we're in a house under the Fidelis charm," Harry grinned seemingly unperturbed at his sandwiched state.

"And I just happened to be in the middle of their testosterone war," Hermione snapped, "Gin, will you please help unwrap us?" Unable to move her head she pleaded out of the corner of her eyes.

Ginny fought the grin that threatened her face as she entertained the idea of just leaving them there to fend for themselves.

"Please Ginny!" Her brother yelled from wherever his head was, "You don't want to know where my head is!"

Harry winced the first sign of discomfort he displayed, "Really," He said, "you don't. Help us?"

Ginny sighed, "I repeat my earlier statement," She said as she grabbed a pair of scissors from the floor and worked on cutting them out of their predicament, "You are sooooo lucky I found you before Fred or George."

A chorus of "thank yous" and praises rose from the pile of human being and wrapping as Ginny meticulously cut her brother and his two best friends out of the wrapping. As soon as the paper was thin enough Ron ripped himself out with a gasp and crawled away from the other two as quickly as he could falling to the ground with a huff.

"Oh Merlin!" He cried breathing loudly, "I thought I was gonna die!"

Harry was the next to be freed and he carefully stretched as he sat up off of Hermione helping Ginny cut the ribbons that bound the young witch.

"You wouldn't have died," Harry said with a grin, "Scarred for life maybe, but you'll live."

Ron raised his head to glare at Harry, "I would have liked to change positions with you so you could see how I felt."

Harry paused and straightened blinking at his friend, "You would? You wouldn't mind my head in your—."

"Don't say it!" Ron snapped shooting up into a sitting position throwing his hand out as though he could stop the words physically, "And No! I don't want your head anywhere near...there." He winced and fell back to the floor flopping his arms out like a rag doll.

Ginny had her eyes trained on her brother inquisitively and looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow.

"You don't want to know," Harry said before she could say anything, "You really, really don't."

Ginny pouted feeling an opportunity for blackmail slipping away from her fingers.

"Gin," Hermione moaned piteously, "I'm still stuck."

Ginny grinned sheepishly and turned back to the task at hand. It took ten minutes for Ginny and Harry to cut through the ribbons and wrapping paper enough so that they could wiggle Hermione out of the mess she'd been cocooned in. Harry helped Hermione sit up and she groaned placing her hands on her lower back and arching her

chest to stretch. Ginny watched Harry with lidded eyes as his own eyes involuntarily followed the curve of Hermione's back before he quickly looked away self-consciously a frown gracing his features. A slow smile flitted across Ginny's face unnoticed by any of the three in the room.

"So how exactly did Hermione end up as the present and you two the box?" She asked Harry.

Harry winced, "It was an accident. Me and Ron wanted to see how many boxes we could wrap with magic. It sort of...escalated into a contest." Harry sighed, "There was so much paper and ribbon flying around the room we didn't notice that we weren't wrapping any boxes."

"They were wrapping me," Hermione glared, "I got a wad of paper in my mouth at some point so they didn't hear me screaming until I managed to spit it out."

"Then we tried to help her," Ron moaned miserably from the floor.

"And forgot to end the spell," Hermione's glare darkened.

Ginny stared at the three of them biting her lips together to keep from laughing, "How...long ago was this?" Ginny asked slowly.

The trio all stared at Ginny with blank faces and said all in monotone at the same time, "Three hours ago."

Sirius Black paused on the landing to the stairs as he heard a peal of laughter from Ron and Harry's room. Curious he found Ginny clutching the doorway as she stumbled out of the room holding her stomach as she laughed. When she passed he peered inside to see three very disheveled teenagers two with miserable faces who stared at Hermione apologetically. Hermione looked...ruffled was the best word for it and a dark glare marred her features.

"Do I...want to know?" Sirius asked glancing around at the brightly colored mess that was draped over every surface of the room winking and sparkling merrily.

"No." Hermione snapped and the boys moaned.

Sirius looked around the room again, "Well Molly wants you all down to help set up for dinner..." He said slowly.

Hermione shot up and stomped to her bedroom to get...un-rumpled Sirius supposed. Ron just groaned and rolled over so his back was facing Sirius.

Harry sighed, "We'll be right down Sirius." He said.

Sirius nodded and glanced once at Ron suspiciously before leaving the room.

Harry looked at Ron, "We should clean this up," He said raising a hand to do so magically.

Ron held out his hand from his position on the floor, "No," He said without looking at Harry, "No magic. I'll do it," His hand flopped back down to rub his face, "You go help Mum."

Harry nodded at his best friend bemused, "You sure?" He asked.

"Yes," Ron sighed miserably, "Just go."

Harry grabbed onto the bed behind him and pulled himself up. He looked around the room confused for a moment and held out a hand. A pile of wrapping paper shook before his cane shot out from underneath to slap into his hand. He grinned a little as Ron got up off the floor and began gathering wads of paper and ribbon into his hands.

Harry made his way downstairs feeling several new magical signatures coming from the kitchen. There had been an order meeting that night after they'd gotten back from the Alley and many of the members were invited to stay for dinner. Harry had stayed out of sight not wanting to see the order members, or rather, not wanting to see their reaction to him. He knew why they were all there; Mr. Weasley almost died, they needed to know where they stood and what to do about the Guard duties. He hesitated outside of the door and took a slow deep breath before pushing open the door to the kitchen and stepping in.

Inside four unknown witches and Wizards sat at one end of the table talking quietly to Mr. Weasley clutching mugs of some warm sweet smelling substance Harry was pretty sure consisted of either Butterbeer or Firewhisky. When he came in the gentle 'clack' of his cane alerted them to his presence. Almost at once it seemed the four people stared startled at Harry and the young boy forced himself not to wince.

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry said ignoring the shocked faces of the order members he didn't know, "Sirius said you needed help?"

"Oh yes Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley smiled handing him a clump of silverware, "Take these to the table please."

Harry nodded wrapping his hand around the silverware.

"Good heavens Molly," One of the strangers said, "The boy can barely walk let alone set the table! Let one of us do it."

Firewhisky then, Harry thought with a frown, "It's all right Madam," He smiled, "I've done this before. I'll be fine." As an attempt to pacify the Witch Harry added, "Thanks for the thought."

The witch frowned at Harry obviously concerned. Harry had to

remind himself that the woman had the best intentions and that he did look rather awful. Among the Weasleys and Grangers he always forgot how he must appear to outsiders. His foster parents didn't treat him any differently than the other children despite his deformities.

"So you're him then," A Wizard said quietly, "You're Harry Potter."

Harry nodded without pausing in his job.

"Funny," The Wizard continued, "you don't seem deranged to me."

Harry gifted the man with a grin, "Oh I'm deranged all right," Harry jerked his head back toward the hall, "Just a moment ago I wrapped my best friend in a cocoon of gift paper and topped her off with a bow."

"He and Ron wrapped me in gift paper," Hermione said entering the room with a reprimanding glare at Harry, "But it was an accident, magic gone a bit wild. And why are you telling people your deranged?" She grabbed a stack of plates and followed Harry as he set the silverware.

"I thought it was funny," Harry shrugged.

Molly turned around with a frown, "What's this about wild magic?" She asked carefully.

The four spectators at the table had the rare privilege of witnessing Harry Potter freeze with sudden teenaged guilt.

"Would you believe us if we said it was self-wrapping gift paper?" He asked.

Molly Weasley frowned and placed her hands on her hips, "Just because we are under the Fidelis doesn't mean you lot should just forgo the rules and practice magic! You're still under age!"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other uncomfortably.

"Sorry Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said, "I didn't think any harm would come of it."

"Molly they are young," Mr. Weasley said, "And we are under the Fidelis...Harry doesn't even have a wand that can be traced..."

"Harry doesn't have a wand?" One of the Wizards at the table asked incredulously, "Then how does he practice magic?"

"Wandlessly," Hermione said with an apologetic look at Harry, "Madam Sinistra has been teaching him."

Harry frowned a little at Hermione he didn't want it to be widely known he did wandless magic that easily. The four witches and Wizards at the table were giving Harry a sort of shocked/appraised look that made him uncomfortable.

"Look," Harry said, "We are all Wizards here; we all have magic in us. We can all do wandless magic if we practice it. It's not really that spectacular."

"You say Madam Sinistra is teaching you?" Asked the Witch from earlier.

"Uh, yeah," Harry said, "I'm her apprentice."

The four strangers smiled at each other and relaxed.

"She's a very accomplished Witch," One man said to another, "It makes sense she'd be teaching such an obscure art to her apprentice."

The other man nodded as though that were only to be expected.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other with raised eyebrows. The rest of the household began filing into the room as the smells from the Kitchen became too alluring to ignore any longer. Ron came down just as Ginny was finishing the story of walking in on the trio and having to help them un-wrap themselves. He groaned as he sat down next to Hermione burying his face in his hands. Hermione patted his back in empathy feeling the same embarrassment as the Twins blew the tale out of proportion and everyone had a good laugh at their expense.

Harry trudged up the stairs feeling as though he had been in a fishbowl all evening.

The flames wrapped around Harry as he hovered inches above the ground his eyes open and unseeing. He was concentrating solely on his fire making it hover millimeters around his person. The heat that came from the fire created an artificial wind around him fluttering his hair and t-shirt. The goal here was to not allow the flames to scorch his shirt. He got infinitely tired of ruining clothing when he got even the least bit upset and was trying to see if there was a way to remedy that little problem. Miles away he felt Madam Sinistra tugging at his magic trying to distract him as she often did when she felt him train. He smirked a little at the challenge knowing there was no way for her to come to Grimmauld place without an invitation.

For a moment his mind faltered and he felt his t-shirt get warm as he wondered why his mentor hadn't been given an invitation. He shifted a little pushing the flames back just a centimeter with a disapproving frown. It must have something to do with the fact that she wasn't an Order Member.

Harry's body began to tip to the left as he felt his own magic pushing him over and he threw out a hand to re-balance himself. The flames around his body wrapped around his arm at the sudden movement

and shot downward bursting from his hand onto the grey wooden floor with a loud "fwoosh" then "bang". Harry fell to the ground in sudden panic scrambling to put out the fire as he heard thunderous footsteps steaming up the stairs. He could imagine Madam Sinistra shaking her head in disappointment and then didn't have to imagine the water that poured onto him from the open attic door.

Harry sighed as water cascaded down on him soaking him to the bone. Hermione, Ron, Sirius, Ginny and the Twins stared in at him with shocked looks on their faces. Harry looked down at his chest and winced, in his moment of panic the fire had once again fused with his skin not only scorching his clothing but burning it clean off of him.

"Damnit," He sighed, "Those were my favorite jeans too."

He heard the Twins burst into uproar and two "eeps" as his voice effectively snapped the two females out of their wide-eyed staring contest and the sound of hurried footsteps as they quickly retreated. Sirius cracked a smile at his godson and conjured a robe throwing it at Harry.

"So is there a reason you're naked?" Ron asked.

"It was an accident," Harry sighed tying the robe together.

The twins looked at each other with wide grins, "That would be a difficult accident." George stated.

"I think our boy is a bit of an Exhibitionist at heart," Fred sighed, "At least you were up here and not out in the parlor."

"I'm not an exhibitionist," Harry said, "I was experimenting."

"Without your clothes," Fred deadpanned, "Sorry mate, no matter how you look at it, that just sounds wrong."

"You could experiment just as well in a bathroom," George grinned.

Harry threw a piece of charred wood at him as answer.

Ron picked up the piece of wood he'd thrown and raised his eyebrows, "Ah," He said, "I see, accident."

Sirius looked at the wood piece then raised an eyebrow at Harry, "What'd you burn?" He asked.

Harry looked at the four men sheepishly, "Erm," He said, "The floor."

"And your clothes," Ron said fingering the burned stick.

"Sorry," Harry sighed, "I was trying not to scorch anything. That was the point."

"Well next time you plan on playing with fire come get an adult." Sirius said, "I may not like this house but I'd rather not have to deal with a hole in the ceiling if it's all the same to you."

"I doubt the girls would appreciate it either," Fred grinned.

"Their room is right below here," George smiled sweetly.

Harry blanched at the embarrassing thought that he could have scorched a hole through the ceiling and into their room.

"You might want to go get some clothes on," Ron grinned, "After the show you gave them I have a feeling they wouldn't mind an accident like this one from their ceiling."

Harry felt his face heating up and steam began rising from his wet skin. Sirius sighed and pointed his wand at Harry sending another torrent of water in the boy's direction.

"What was all that time in the hospital spent on if you can't control your fire when you're embarrassed?" He asked with a dramatic sigh as Harry sputtered.

Harry glared at his godfather again, soaked to the bone he looked a bit like a wet cat which caused the other men in the room to smirk. Harry shot out a hand and his cane slapped into it. He hobbled passed them with a dark frown and muttered he was "going to go take a shower".

The twins followed him talking over his head about the odd predicament they'd found him in and what he should have done to make his situation worse. Ron left to go joke to the girls about their reaction to seeing Harry's bare behind. Sirius stood in the door way shaking his head as he looked at the smoking wood on the floor making a mental note to repair it later.

Hermione sat in the parlor finishing the homework she Ron and Harry were working on occasionally looking at Harry out of the corner of her eyes. He wore a white t-shirt and pajama pants as it was evening and his unruly hair was still damp and wild after his shower. He leaned on the table with his head resting in one palm as he worked a dark frown on his face. Ron sat beside him with a small mischievous smirk as he wrote in his "dream diary" for Divination. Hermione looked over to her left and she and Ginny traded a small smirk as though sharing an inside joke together. She turned her head back to look at Harry and was startled to see him staring at his left hand fire licking the insides of his fingers.

"Harry!" Hermione said startled, "What are you doing?" She hissed.

"Proving something to myself," He said.

He slowly moved his hand down unaware that the rest of the occupants in the parlor that had just been relaxing and chatting were staring at him with caution. He slowly picked up the edge of the piece of parchment he'd been writing on the fire touching it but not burning it. The fire danced and flicked trying to lick the parchment to get a quick taste but no matter how the flames danced they never seemed to touch the parchment even though to the eyes of the observers it looked as though they were.

"So that's what you were doing," Sirius breathed.

Harry nodded never taking his eyes off the flames, "What I was trying to do anyways," He said lifting his hand from the parchment and leaning back to gently place the flames on the logs in the fireplace behind him, "I got distracted, made a mistake." He said with a small blush, "I'm sorry I ruined the floor in your attic Sirius."

Sirius shook his head, "Like I said, next time let me know so I can fire-proof the place."

Harry nodded and looked at Mrs. Weasley, "Well?" he asked.

Molly jumped a little startled that he'd caught her disapproving frown, "I don't like you doing magic Harry," She said, "Your deliberately breaking a law but...I know how much you need to learn control and well," She sighed, "I suppose a little magic in this house where no one can trace you is ok."

Ron grinned brightly at that and the fire in the fireplace danced merrily behind Harry. Small tendrils of it reached out toward the boy but he brushed them back with a small smile.

"Thank you Mrs. Weasley," He said.

"Well if you lot are done with your homework I suppose it's time we start preparing for tomorrow morning before you have to get to bed."

Mr. Granger grinned.

The children looked at each other with huge grins on their faces and put their homework away to help the adults finish the last minute preparations for Christmas Morning. By the time they went to bed a large brightly lit tree twinkled in the parlor with heaps of wrapped packages beneath them and a merry little fire that slowly dwindled by the end of the night to sleep as embers by next morning.

Christmas morning brought with it warm sunlight streaming through the window Harry and Ron had forgotten to close last night and the smells of wonderful things being baked somewhere down below. Harry opened his dual colored eyes watching the last vestiges of a strange dream blow away from his subconscious. He turned his head to his right to find Ron's bed was empty then left to the cracked open door. He pushed his covers off lazily and stretched slowly feeling the cobwebs of his mind ebb as he pushed himself further into wakefulness.

He flopped his arms back down to his sides and smiled as he felt the two warm magical signatures of his best friends hover at the door.

"I'm awake," He called grinning as he folded his hands behind his head, "You don't have to hover like a couple of unsure kids."

"We were gonna come in whether you were awake or not," Ron growled good-naturedly, "Come on then gimpy, time to get up."

Harry frowned at Ron's 'gimpy' comment but sat up regardless, "Fine Uncle scrooge, what's got you so excited?"

Ron grinned widely at Harry and Hermione sat next to Harry on his bed, "We did something that you're not going to be happy about but you must understand that we did it because we love you."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "Why does this feel like an 'intervention'?"

Ron chuckled a little, "Maybe because it kind of is." He held out a small rectangular parcel, "Don't you use it unless you feel like it will do something for you. I don't want all our hard work to go to waste."

Harry raised an eyebrow and took the small parcel gently peeling off the wrapping. Behind the wrapping was a small apothecary box and inside that box was a little glass vial with liquid that shined with a gentle silver glow not unlike the moon. Harry's eyes widened and he quickly popped the top of the vial off to smell the contents. It smelled like salty tears.

"Why?" He asked quietly putting the top back on the vial.

"Because we believe in you more than you do," Hermione said quietly, "And we hope that one day you'll believe in yourself enough to take this."

"How did you? When did you?" Harry looked between them.

"Remember Diagon Alley?" Hermione smiled, "When Ron ran off to do the last minute shopping he took a list I'd given him before we left. The Library here has an excellent potions section though it was tricky to brew in secret. We met just about every night after we were sure you were asleep to work on it. Destroyed two old cauldrons in the process. I hope Sirius won't mind."

Harry looked down at his lap ashamed, "I really am growing soft if I never noticed you'd left," He said to Ron.

"Or maybe I'm just that good;" Ron said with a lazy stretch, "Just keep it with you. Even if you never plan to use it. It'll make us feel better."

The left side of Harry's mouth twitched in mild amusement, "You sure this isn't going to kill me?"

"Honestly?" Ron asked.

Hermione frowned at Ron, "We're sure."

Harry fingered the glass vial in his lap and said nothing as his emotions whirled in his gut, "Thanks," He said quietly.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder, "I can tell you're really choked up about this," She said with a playful grin, "You're only ever quiet when you're feeling really emotional."

Harry smiled a little shoving her with his shoulder, "Shove off 'Mione," He said, "Let me have my moment all right?"

Hermione laughed a little and squeezed his arm, "Merry Christmas Emo boy."

Harry smiled.

Christmas for Harry was a nostalgic affair. The rest of the day was spent opening presents, eating a massive breakfast of sausages, eggs, and pastries and talking and laughing around the fire in the parlor. The next morning the children would once again be leaving for Hogwarts so they paid extra effort to relaxation. Christmas dinner was a banquet fit for a king in Harry's opinion with Mrs. Weasley's and Mr. and Mrs. Granger's combined culinary skills. Remus and Tonks joined them that evening for the celebration with all of the adult men getting thoroughly smashed on fire whisky and singing obnoxious carols that the Weasley twins added too. Harry, Ginny, Hermione, and Ron laughed as the twins made fun of the adults without them noticing even though they sat right next to them.

That night Harry had few dreams but he woke up several times due to Ron's. Apparently the thought of returning to Hogwarts, and thus

Dolores Umbridge, was making Ron's subconscious more active than usual. Several times that night Harry found himself talking calmly to Ron and silently wishing he could ring the old toad's neck.

That next morning had the entire household scrambling to recover all of the belongings that had spread so far over every surface. It amazed Harry, who had so little, just where he was finding socks and other unmentionables around the house. He blushed once when while searching for a match to a pair of his socks beneath the wash basin in the bathroom he found a black and white polka-dot bra that ended up belonging to Hermione. He never did find the other sock.

Slowly they all said their goodbyes to Sirius, Remus, and Tonks. The Weasleys and Grangers were accompanying them to the train station. Sirius crushed Harry in a tight hug and slipped a small parcel into his hand which he ordered Harry not to open until he was in a safe place to do so. Harry grinned at his Godfather and slipped the parcel into his trunk to open later when he reached Hogwarts and then walked with the rest of his adoptive family out the door.

The train sailed out of the station and into the English countryside without mishap. Harry sat by the window watching the world pass by him in silence. He was wearing the Weasley sweater that all of the children had gotten that Christmas thinking about how little he'd actually been out in the world the past semester and worrying he hadn't finished all of his homework for Madam Sinistra. His fingers idly played with a small flame in his lap as he thought and the door to his compartment slid open silently.

"I've never liked phoenix's," A dreamy voice spoke, "I rather prefer Pyreflies and Flickracks. Less showy."

Harry turned his gaze to Luna who sat quietly next to him watching him with her owlsh eyes. He shook his hair out of his eyes too look more fully at her curious and blinked surprised.

"What are pyreflies and flickracks?" He asked.

"Pyreflies are small fire bugs that hide in the moon flower and only come out at night when the flower blooms." Luna smiled, "My dad saw some once, but they were so shy that they snuffed out the minute they knew of his presence and disappeared. A pity," She said dreamily, "He was going to catch one for me for my birth day."

Harry nodded, "I'm sorry then," He said.

"Oh it wasn't his fault." She said, "He just didn't know that he needed honey to attract them. They are rather fond of it you know."

Harry smiled politely vaguely amused by this girl he'd never really spoken too until that moment.

"You are dark," She said suddenly her head whipping around to pinpoint him, "That darkness leaves you to open to influence." Her eyes were wider then Harry had ever seen them and she stared at him with an unnerving intensity that he could almost physically feel, "You will have to make a choice to lose someone very important to you and live to become stronger and a beacon of hope or to fall into corruption and become the monster your appearance makes you out to be."

"Luna—what?" Harry stammered then froze as she jerked toward him her face inches from his own.

Those wide pale blue eyes bore into his skull and Harry gasped pushing himself into the back of the chair feeling as though he were being hammered into the fabric by a force he could not name, "Her teeth have marked you." She said with a voice that flowed through him, "You know this well. She, the Black Banshee, will never stop hunting you. She will be there when you make your decision so decide well."

Harry stared at her aura, it had reached out and wrapped around him entering his magic in a way Harry could never describe. He shook and scooted away from Luna repulsed. Her aura retracted and a faint smile appeared and disappeared so quickly Harry felt he could have imagined it. The door opened again and Harry's head snapped up to look at Hermione and Ron who stood in the open door with sweets in their hands and looking surprised.

"Luna," Hermione said, "Hi, um, are you traveling with us?"

Harry winced as Ron smirked at Hermione.

"Oh yes," She smiled as though Hermione hasn't said anything obvious, "Just not in this compartment. I'll be travelling with some of my other friends. I just wanted to say hello to Harry." She smiled at Harry and Harry stared at her warily, "Have a good day Harry."

Harry sat for several minutes in stunned silence. His face white as he stared at her before he realized a response was expected of him.

"Erm," Harry fidgeted, "Thanks Luna. You too."

She stood and smiled dreamily at Harry and bid farewell to his friends. Ron watched Luna go with a raised eyebrow then looked at Harry.

"Why is it I get the feeling weird stuff happens to you whenever I'm not here?" Ron asked.

"You don't even know the half of it, listen, Luna wasn't here just to say 'hello'," Harry said leaning forward as Hermione sat down next to him and Ron sat in the seat across from him.

He told them about what had happened.

"There was something odd about it," Harry said, "something I really

can't put into words. It was almost as if she was someone else. Her magic...is strange."

"Well it is Luna isn't it?" Ron shook his head, "She's always been a bit off."

"Yeah, but...you can't just expand your aura to reach into someone else's magic like she did. Not without an incantation, and even then people don't do it unless there's a link. Like your bond with Sinistra or Voldemort." Hermione said with a frown, "that is bizarre."

Harry snorted, "Bizarre isn't even the correct way to describe it." He sighed and leaned back in his seat, "I wish people would stop messing with my magic."

"Seems to be a theme with you mate," Ron sighed and rubbed his temples tiredly, "Maybe we should just forget the whole thing."

Hermione frowned, "I don't know if we should. Luna's odd, I'll give her that, but what she did to Harry, that's serious. We should probably keep an eye on her."

"On Luna?" Ron asked, "Aren't you being a bit paranoid? She probably didn't even know what she was doing if she was doing it."

"All the same," Hermione said, "I don't trust her. Never have. There's something about her that just makes me feel...uneasy."

Ron rolled his eyes, "You're just annoyed by her."

"A little," Hermione said, "Yes, but that doesn't excuse the fact. Entering someone else's magic without their express permission is wrong."

"If it's any consolation," Harry said rubbing his temples exhausted, "She makes me uneasy too." He sighed closing his eyes, leaning his

head back then slumped, "What a brilliant way to return from break."

"Only you Mate," Ron said with an ironic grin, "Only you."

Harry gave Ron a single half-hearted glare before grinning back. Brilliant return indeed.

Stepping In

Ron, Harry, and Hermione got into a carriage with Neville and Ginny on their way back to the castle first discussing MOB business then moving on to the welcome back Feast that was sure to take place later that evening. The warning given to Harry by Luna Lovegood was not forgotten, but neither was it being dwelled upon. The scarred young man while thoroughly creeped out by the whole experience was more concerned with the returning overwhelming blindness he felt as he stepped back into the castle and was accosted by all of its glorious magic. He felt momentarily dizzy and had to close his right eye knowing it would take at least sleeping in the power to adjust.

"I really need to figure out a way to make some sort of anti-magic eye-patch," He informed Hermione with a slow grin, "I could be Black-beard's reincarnation."

Hermione rose an eyebrow with a small grin of her own, "Or at least Emilio Largo's grandson."

"Emilio who?" Ron asked as the three of them sat down at the Gryffindor table.

"Never mind Ron," Hermione sighed, "You wouldn't understand the reference."

"Oi," Harry said nodding his head over to a tall approaching figure, "Isn't that your Slytherin boyfriend?" Harry asked Ron.

Ron scowled, "Yes Harry," He said sarcastically, "My boyfriend. What is it with your weird jokes?" Ron asked, "That's Artemis," He stood up, "What's he doing coming over here? The rest of his mates don't seem too happy about it."

"Weasley," Artemis said stiffly as he approached the trio, "Granger," He nodded at Hermione, "There's going to be a problem with the

MOB."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked looking at Harry, "What kind of problem?"

Artemis glanced back at his classmates several of which were scowling at him, "I'll talk to you about it after the feast." He nodded to Hermione and Ron and stared at Harry uneasily for a minute before turning around and heading back to his table.

Harry watched him go uncomfortably, "What do you think he meant?" Harry asked.

"What I want to know is why he barely looked at you," Hermione said with a frown.

"What'd you do?" Ron asked confused, "Artemis is a relatively cool bloke for a Slytherin."

"Nothing..." Harry said, "I hope."

"You hope?" Ron asked confused.

"Actually," Hermione said thoughtfully, "I think I've noticed you two don't ever seem to interact during MOB meetings. Why is that?"

Harry winced, "I just—let's drop it ok?"

Dumbledore stood up to welcome the students back to Hogwarts and Hermione shut her open mouth with a look that said they would talk later. Then the food appeared and Harry dug into the food with so much enthusiasm Hermione couldn't get two words in. When the food was cleared off his plate Madam Sinistra came to their table and whisked the boy away leaving a frustrated young Witch to sit and stew over the conversation that was never ended.

When Artemis approached the table again Ron and Hermione listened in shock as he told them about Professor Umbridge's newest "proclamation". All groups and clubs were disbanded unless brought to the Inquisitor to be approved of. He told them that while the proclamation was not yet in action it would most certainly be done tomorrow. When asked how Artemis knew about it he informed him that his cousin worked in the Ministry under the Umbridge's department.

Ron sat fuming as he stared up at the table and Hermione and Artemis discussed what should be done. Artemis, as a Slytherin, felt it was too risky to continue meeting secretly and advised the two creators of the MOB that if it did continue they might lose all of the Slytherin's they had gained in the club. Hermione argued they should continue regardless despite the risks because learning Defense against the Dark Arts was too invaluable to leave to Professor Umbridge's tutelage alone.

Artemis agreed she had a point and promised to talk to his fellow club mates privately to know their opinions. He wasn't about to risk expulsion if he could avoid it but he agreed that what the MOB did was too valuable to give up based on the miniscule possibilities of being found out when it had been secret in the first place and have yet to be found out. He bid Hermione and Ron a good night and left to talk to his club mates in his house. Hermione and Ron left with several other Gryffindors to the Common Room grabbing Ginny and the Twins along the way to ask their opinions.

By the time Harry returned from Madam Sinistra's office and thus her lessons they had decided to continue holding secret meetings and to be even more careful about how they met. Harry joined the small group in front of the fire with a sigh and by the time they were done talking he was lying passed out on the couch. Ron and his siblings left while Hermione sat writing in her note book with the fire painting gold in her hair. She stretched and looked over at Harry who was for all intents and purposes dead to the world.

"I didn't appreciate how you avoided my question you know," She muttered to the sleeping boy half heartedly placing her chin in her palm as she stared at him, "But then I don't mean to push you either." She sighed, "Not that you're even listening, you're asleep. I might as well be talking to myself."

She scooted over to the couch and laid her head on crossed arms at the edge of the cushions. He lay on his stomach his head buried in the crook of one of his arms the other arm lazily dangling off the side of the couch with his fingers resting on the rug. Hermione shook her head bemused. She knew that he only seemed this peaceful when he was good and truly tired. It made her wonder at what exactly Madam Sinistra put him through when he was with her. Her eyes traveled down the dangling arm to his hand recognizing that some of his scars had faded and he'd gained some muscle giving them a toned shape beneath the striations. She involuntarily traced one scar that indented the skin in a long thin stripe appearing as though a knife had cut out a shallow piece of his flesh.

"Why are you so nervous around Artemis Harry?" She whispered, "One would think after the horrors you suffered an adolescent boy would be nothing."

"It's the adolescent boy's father that scares me," Hermione's head shot up to notice Harry's head had turned to watch her trace his scar, "Or the thought that I may have accidentally killed someone he was related to over the summer."

"I thought you were asleep," Hermione said.

"I was," Harry said, "'Till you started fondling me." Hermione was about to protest when she noticed the shape of his eyes and the grin on his lips.

She lightly slapped his arm instead and watched it swing back and

forth in slight amusement, "I didn't know Artemis's father was a Death Eater."

Harry shrugged, "He might not be," He said, "But one of his relatives might be. He looks at me like he knows I'm dangerous. It's...awkward."

"You couldn't control your fire then Harry," Hermione said quietly, "You do now. That makes you a little less dangerous." She took his limp hand and began carefully inspecting it.

Harry chuckled, "Nice try 'Mione." He watched her run her fingers over his hand tracing some of the scars and opening and closing his palm for him.

"What is it you and Madam Sinistra do that makes you pass out on the couch?" Hermione asked.

"She was trying to help me tune my magic to the Castle's," Harry said closing his eyes relaxed, "She thought it might help the overwhelming feeling of 'blindness' I have here. It's a weakness I can't afford to have in the Wizarding world. Tomorrow we'll start working on narrowing down my senses so that I can pinpoint different magics in the castle." He breathed out slowly, "It makes my head hurt."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, "Maybe we can make not an anti-magic eye-patch, but one that filters out specific magics? Would that help?"

"It might." Harry said opening his eyes pulling his arm up to push himself into a more upward position, "But how would we go about doing it?"

Hermione pulled herself up on the couch next to him pushing his legs against the back so she'd have room, "There are several methods we

could try. The main concern is that we wouldn't want to spell the cloth or you'd only see the runes for the spell and nothing else. But we might be able to weave the charms needed into the thread. It would be dimmer, less overpowering maybe..."

"Maybe..." Harry agreed watching her mull over her new problem.

Had she always made her lips pout when she thought about a new problem? He watched the dancing yellow light of the fire flicker across her face. A few stray pieces of curly hair drifted beside her face catching the fire-light and reflecting it. She was always so down to earth except those few times when a problem was presented to her then a flame would erupt in her lighting up her brown eyes to dark amber. Harry was startled to notice an urge to push back those few stray hairs. He clutched his hands to his sides with a frown.

"We could use Dragon scales; they have a natural resistance to magic after all. It would be temporary until we could figure out how to allow magic in but keep it at a minimum..." Hermione had continued talking as he had zoned out, "But Dragon scales are expensive and not sold in a lot of normal apothecaries. Unless Ron's brother would be willing to donate one I'm not sure how we'd be able to get a hold of one."

"Hermione," Harry interrupted holding up a hand, "It's late, let it rest. Maybe sleeping on it will help solve the problem."

"I'll go to the library tomorrow to look into it," Hermione promised, "But you're right, sleeping on it might help." She looked around suddenly noticing something absent, "Where's your cane?"

Harry pointed behind his head with a raised eyebrow. She leaned over his legs to rest her shoulder against the back of the couch straining to look behind him. The ruby tip of the cane glinted back at her reflecting the firelight.

Hermione blushed a little, "Oh, I didn't see it," She grinned sheepishly patting his knee, "Sometimes you move around so well I forget it's there."

Harry snorted, "Yeah right," He grinned, "I move around this Castle like an old man."

Hermione laughed, "Not like any old man I've ever met."

"Just watch," Harry grinned, "I'll be two hundred tomorrow, then next week fifty."

"You'll be able to give Professor Dumbledore a run for his money." Hermione teased, "But seriously, have you been practicing walking without the cane like Madam Pomfrey asked you?"

Harry winced, "No."

Hermione frowned, "Harry..." She said warningly.

"It hurts Hermione," Harry said defensively.

"Well maybe you just need some help," Hermione said, "Have you asked for any."

Harry looked away from her and she frowned, "You haven't," She stated disappointedly, "I thought all that time in the hospital taught you how to ask for help."

"I haven't had time," Harry muttered.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, "And all that time spent at Headquarters was--?"

"Spent eating and merry making," Harry said seriously, "Those are two very important tasks that must be performed. The Christmas

Gods demand it."

Hermione sighed incredulously and stood up, "All right then," She said determinedly turning around.

"Mione," Harry whined, "Now?"

"No time like the present," Hermione chirped with a grin holding her hands out to him, "Tomorrow you'll have homework and another session with Madam Sinistra, tonight you're free."

"Free to be tormented by an obsessed witch," Harry muttered.

"Oh boo-hoo," Hermione grinned shaking her hands at him impatiently, "Come on Emo Boy. Just keep hold of my hands."

"And what happens when I fall?" Harry asked skeptically.

"If you fall," Hermione corrected, "Then I'll just cushion you. Obviously if you fall while holding onto me I'll be coming down with you," She grinned sarcastically at him, "So you better not fall."

"You're an artist when it comes to making boys feel better about themselves," Harry droned.

"Aren't I?" Hermione smiled sweetly, "Now come on," She urged leaning down and grabbing his hands, "Up!" She pulled him to his feet and he stumbled letting go of her hands and grabbing onto her shoulders as his legs almost gave out on him.

"Merlin Hermione," He gasped his face white with pain, "Don't pull so quickly!"

Hermione blushed ashamed, "Sorry," She said, "But you're up aren't you? Let's try again shall we?" She placed her hands on his hips because most his weight was leaning on her shoulders and carefully

slid her hands up to his hands as she stepped away from him, "This better?" She asked.

"A little," Harry admitted.

"Excellent," Hermione smiled, "Then let's take a step forward shall we?"

Harry's mouth was clenched shut as he nodded his hands crushing hers with barely contained worry. She took a step back and their arms straightened between them then he pushed down against Hermione's arms and she held his hands tighter. Carefully he lifted one foot and gasping stepped forward until their arms were bent again.

"That was good," Hermione smiled encouragingly, "Let's try another step."

Harry nodded choosing not to comment as he stared down at the floor in concentration. He lifted his other foot and his other leg shook. He dropped it back into place and tried lifting it again.

"Hermione," Harry gasped feeling sweat begin to form on his brow, "I don't think I can--!"

"You can!" Hermione said determinedly, "Give yourself a little credit will you? You all ready took one step, you can do two! I won't move this time in case you feel yourself falling."

Harry didn't nod this time. He just clenched his teeth together and took a deep breath lifting his foot and carefully moving it forward to rest it somewhere in front of him. He didn't waste time preparing himself then as he lifted his other foot and moved it forward. He cried out as he put that foot down and his knees shook then gave out on him. Hermione stepped into his space wrapping her arms around him and grunting as his full weight fell on her. They wobbled for a minute

but didn't fall. She was grinning as he breathed heavily against her wrapping his arms around her shoulders and clutching her desperately.

"Three steps!" She said, "That's a good start."

He snorted into her neck, "You're evil." He gasped, "Pure bleeding evil."

Her grin widened, "Tell me something Harry," She chirped good-naturedly, "How much weight do you put on the cane of yours? Do you cheat with magic?"

Harry reached up carefully while still crushing himself against her and lightly slapped the back of her head, "I'm rubbing off on you," He muttered annoyed, "That's not a good thing."

"Well do you?" Hermione asked truly curious.

"No," Harry muttered, "At least, not consciously."

Hermione frowned thoughtfully and stared at the cane over his shoulder, "Lets get you back to the couch."

"That would be brilliant," Harry said.

Hermione and Harry changed positions so that one of his arms was thrown over her shoulder and they walked together back to the couch. Both of them collapsed into the cushions and Harry leaned his head back gasping with relief.

"So?" Hermione asked.

"It's a technique that Sinistra taught me," Harry explained carefully, "It allows me to walk relatively well with the cane by pushing fire into my legs increasing the density of my bones so they don't hurt as much."

He looked sidelong at Hermione, "I can't do it all the time with full power just in small amounts over a long period of time. If I did use the full power of the technique I could in theory walk and move like any normal human being, but its incredibly magically draining to constantly support weak bones with magic. So I only do a little all the time building up my reserves for when I'll really need it."

"But wouldn't that also hinder any healing you could be doing?" Hermione asked alarmed.

"Me and Sinistra did theorize that that might happen," Harry admitted, "But we only intend this to be temporary until my legs show some real improvement."

"But if it's hindering your improvement how is it supposed to be temporary?" Hermione asked angrily, "Harry, this is dangerous! You shouldn't be straining your body and your magic like this!"

"But Hermione, my magic reserves," Harry said, "They've grown so much! This technique is the main reason I've been able to control my core! And because of it my magic has grown exponentially!"

"But just now," Hermione frowned, "When you weren't pushing fire into your bones...how much did that hurt as opposed to how you should be feeling right now!"

"I don't know how I'm supposed to be feeling right now Hermione," Harry frowned, "There was nothing normal about any of my injuries. No one knows how quickly I'm supposed to heal. I need a way to run if a moment ever came for me to need to do so. I need this. Madam Sinistra recognized that and so taught it to me."

Hermione stood up and Harry felt the absence of her body heat when she did so. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and stood in front of the fireplace. The embers turned her to a dark silhouette with a curved back and stubborn shoulders. Harry knew that stance. Not

only did his best friend disapprove, she was worried. Harry let her stew over the information he'd given her so that she could decide how she felt about it.

"I don't think I can approve of this, but I have to trust that Madam Sinistra knows what she's doing," Hermione said at last, "But this means every night we are going to practice you walking without that cane and without your magic understood?" She asked turning to glare at him.

Harry winced and nodded.

"We have to re-build your real muscles Harry," Hermione lectured, "Not just your magical ones."

Harry nodded again this time more seriously, "All right," he nodded, "But Hermione?"

"What?" Hermione asked.

"I um," He fidgeted, "Sort of exhausted myself magically with Madam Sinistra tonight...I don't know if I can make it up those stairs on my own..."

Hermione sighed, "Do you think you're up to trying to walk some more?"

Harry paled a little and looked at the floor, "No," He breathed with dread.

Hermione sighed and picked up her wand summoning a pillow and blanket for him, "You'll want to sleep on the couch then," She said handing him the pillow and helping him stretch on the couch.

"Thanks 'Mione," Harry said sheepishly.

"The things I do for you..." Hermione said rolling her eyes as she threw the blanket over him.

When he stiffly tried to bend over to push the blanket over his feet she rolled her eyes again and grabbed the blanket from him, "All right old man," She teased, "Can't even pull your shoes off, honestly."

Harry reluctantly let her 'tuck him in' and feeling a bit weird for it, "Told you, this week I'd be two hundred." Harry grinned weakly.

She pulled the blanket up to his chest and grinned back at him freezing as she realized how close to his face she was. An image welled up unbidden behind her eyes of Harry sitting naked in the Attic of Grimauld place and a dark blush blossomed over her cheeks. Harry looked surprised as he felt her aura shift to something warm and passionate and she shot away from him embarrassed.

"Hermione?" Harry asked as he thought of what could possibly make her that embarrassed, "You weren't thinking about--?"

Harry suddenly found his head being held beneath a blanket and he flailed, "Oi!" He protested scratching at the fabric.

"I am not thinking of that!" Hermione snapped, "Now shut it and go to sleep!" She jumped away from him and practically ran around the couch toward the stairway.

Harry freed himself from the blanket with a loud dramatic gasp and grinned amused, "Good night 'Mione!" He called jovially.

"Shut it!" Hermione called back to him from somewhere on the stairwell.

Harry laughed and laid the blanket across his chest more comfortably. He truly was exhausted so sleep didn't wait too long to claim him and when it did the nightmares were held at bay for a little while by the

lingering warmth of his best friends arms around him when she'd supported his weight.

"I hope this isn't becoming a habit Mr. Potter," Harry awoke to look up into the stern gaze of his head of house towering over the couch, "I do believe I all ready informed you that the Common Room is not for sleeping in."

Harry blinked several times as his tired mind processed what it was that was being said to him until it dawned on him. His mouth dropped open in a silent "O" formation and then closed.

"Sorry professor," He said, "It's not really an excuse but I was really sore last night."

Professor McGonagall's lips thinned in disapproval, "Well, three points from Gryffindor. Next time I hope you will be able to ask for help up the stairs."

"Yes Professor." Harry agreed.

"Can you make it up the stairs now?" She asked.

"I think so yeah," Harry nodded as he sat up and grabbed the pillow and blanket Hermione had summoned for him.

He grabbed his cane and bracing himself slowly stood with the cane clutched in his hands. Professor McGonagall watched him hobble around the couch and slowly ascend the stairs concern written on her features. When Harry reached his bed in the boys' dormitory he collapsed onto the mattress feeling his upper body sink into the soft bed while his legs dangled off the edge. He contentedly slipped back into oblivion.

He was awoken again an hour later by someone poking him with his own cane. Harry opened one bleary eye to look at his best mate annoyed.

"Shove off Ron," He muttered.

"Where've you been all night?" Ron asked, "You weren't honestly kipping out on the couch all night were you?"

"And if I was?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head, "You need to get up. We have potions first thing this morning after breakfast. Madam Sinistra expects you in her office while we descend into Hell."

"Oh brilliant," Harry moaned stretching slowly, "Exhausted teenagers, a room full of flammable and potentially explosive substances, and Snape." He grinned cheekily at Ron and rolled over on the bed, "Well have fun then, do tell me if you survived will you?"

Ron threw a pillow at him, "Madam Sinistra wants you first thing after breakfast. Do you really want to make her wait?"

Harry sighed and slowly sat up his arms hanging limp like a doll's at his side, "Bugger," He looked at Ron with a pout, "Your right."

"Well don't look so put out about it," Ron snorted, "You don't have to be in a room with Snape."

Harry sighed, "You been practicing meditating?" He asked.

"Um...sure?" Ron grinned.

"I mean it Ron," Harry said looking at his best mate seriously, "You need to practice clearing your mind more. Snape's dangerous; I don't want him peeking into your head do you?"

Ron frowned, "No..."

"Then practice." Harry said.

"All right," Ron said peaceably holding up his hands in surrender, "Between you and Hermione I never get an excuse do I?"

"Nope," Harry grinned at Ron as he pulled on some socks and swapped his shirt for a clean one, "Could you grab my shoes for me? They're in the Common Room."

Ron rolled his eyes, "Yeah sure, whatever."

"You know I'd do the same for you," Harry said.

"Yeah, yeah," Ron waved his hand at Harry as he left the room.

Harry met Ron half way down the stairs and after stopping to slip his shoes on the two of them they made their way down to the great hall for breakfast. They met Hermione at the entrance and entered the great room together sitting down at the table next to Ginny and Neville. Over the course of the morning MOB students came by to talk worriedly about the new proclamation. Hermione tried her best to discourage them from seeking them out but it was impossible to assuage their fears without talking to them directly.

So Harry did what he does best distracting the professors at the head table by showing off to the best of his abilities and conscripting the twins to help him out. By the end of the meal Harry and the twins had separate detentions and nine points were taken from Gryffindor but the MOB members had stopped coming to Hermione in the Great Hall so mission accomplished.

Hermione ended up writing on the coins that the MOB meetings were on "hold" until she could get a proper vote from the other students on

whether or not they wanted to continue. She specified that the vote would be on the coins and no one would be held responsible if they decided not to continue attending.

Then the Defense classes re-commenced and even more proclamations began popping up at alarming rates while Umbridge gained more and more support while slandering Dumbledore. By then the student body was so thoroughly sick of Umbridge that it was nearly a Unanimous vote to continue the MOB. It even gained in popularity, so much so that they had to make separate dates for meetings with different groups.

Every night began a routine with Harry. He'd work with his friends as they helped him slowly take small steps without his cane and without magic. Every night he fell to bed exhausted and in pain escaping into his head and the dream with the white door despite how much he was afraid of what had happened with Mr. Weasley. Madam Pomfrey was proud of this and gave him potions for the pain in low enough portions that he wouldn't become dependent on them.

It was on the day that the paper spoke of a sighting of Bellatrix Lestrange outside of Little Winging that Harry Potter found himself standing in front of the "Wall of Memories" the MOB had put together in the room of requirement. He was staring silently at a photograph of Cedric Diggory right beneath a picture of one of the MOB member's deceased Uncle who had been murdered several months ago by a drunken Wizard. A reminder that anyone could make a mistake and anyone could kill. It was a sobering place for Harry to be and one that he generally avoided if he could. But the photograph that was nagging him was a picture taken last year during the tri-wizard tournament, not of Cedric, but of himself.

He stared for a long time at that picture feeling as though the boy looking out at him and shuffling nervously to the side of the photo was from a past that existed light years away from him. The boy looked young, unblemished, healthy, strong, and even though he

was nervously trying to move out of the photo he was confident in a way Harry never really remembered ever being.

"We forgot to take that one down," A nervous feminine voice spoke quietly behind him, "When we put it up...well, you were dead. Just like him. Cedric."

Harry closed his eyes feeling a momentary discomfort for the sorrow in the young woman's voice recognizing her as Cho Chang. The young witch for whom, a lifetime ago, Harry had held a massive crush on and the young witch for who was also Cedric's past girlfriend.

"Hmm," Harry said tilting his head to the side while studying the photo of himself with theatrical interest, "That's true," He intoned, "I was dead here, so what does that photo mean if I'm here now?" He lifted up his cane and tapped the photo with the end of it three distinct times.

The Harry in the photo changed. His jaw unhinged stretching the skin grotesquely downward with a comical amount of drool hanging out the side. Boils and rot tore chunks of hair out of his skull and one of his eyes popped out to hang by a string. The skin grew taut over bone giving the Harry in the photo a hallow look and his arms barely sinew and skeleton stretched out toward the photo grasping at nothing. As a final touch the photo lost its color becoming black and white and faint fifties horror film music began to emanate from the paper.

Harry grinned at his little masterpiece and turned to look at Cho only to have the grin whipped off his face as she stared in shock at the photo of himself that he'd just thoroughly mangled. At first Harry was confused. He had thought turning the photo into a zombie would be rather symbolic and comical besides that. Then the tears began welling up in the girl's eyes and Harry realized with a clarity that stung that he had been completely insensitive to her feelings.

"That's sick," She gasped staring at him, "Completely nutters!" She said scandalized.

Harry's mouth dropped open trying to find an explanation that didn't make him sound like a complete ass unaware that he was mimicking his zombified self and making things worse. With a barely controlled sniff and a deadly glare Cho Chang reeled her arm back and slapped Harry across the cheek turning on her heels and stomping off to her friend while breaking out in a heartfelt sob that nearly tore Harry's heart in two.

Harry was left standing with and arm outstretched involuntarily grasping at air with his mouth hanging open still trying to find a solution to his complete mistake.

"I-uh-um..." His hand dropped and he sighed, "Oh. Bugger."

"Well done Mate," Ron said leaning against the wall, "You've thoroughly ruined your chances with that one."

Harry sighed, "I thought it'd be funny," He said lamely gesturing at the photo he'd modified.

Ron looked at the photo, "Oh no," He said with a grin, "It's brilliant. Just, that Cho Chang is not the type to appreciate dark humor." He smiled sympathetically at Harry and patted his back, "You'll have better luck next time with someone who isn't in mourning."

"Thanks Ron," Harry said sarcastically ripping the photo off the wall.

"Why are you taking that down?" Ron asked, "It's brilliant!"

Harry stared at Ron and then jerked his head toward the sobbing girl in the far corner of the room, "Excuse me while I go help some first years with the 'Expelliarmous' spell."

"But you don't have a wand," Ron muttered as he watched Harry hobble away.

"Doesn't matter," Harry shot back, "Constant Vigilance!"

Ron grinned. The photo he'd altered sat moaning up at Ron from the ground. Ron's mouth twitched. He picked up the zombified Harry and placed it back on the wall away from Cedric Diggory deciding to make a point of placing some happy news on the wall so that it wasn't all gloom and death. He could imagine why Harry had avoided the wall, considering the things he'd seen and done over the Summer. Being faced with one's demons was always uncomfortable. As was the case with Cho Chang who had been the former Girlfriend of the boy Harry had failed to save. Frankly Ron was impressed with how long Harry had been able to avoid her considering Cho Chang had been interested in talking to him since the first meeting he'd appeared at after his return.

"Oi, not like that!" Ron looked over at Harry who had the hand of one of the first year girls.

"What do you mean?" The Ravenclaw child argued, "I did it just like the book told me to!"

"Blimy," Harry said exasperated, "You're a miniature Hermione—listen," He leaned over her from behind guiding her wand arm out to stretch toward the dummy, "The book may tell you what to say but the diagrams are always a little backward which is why we have a bloody Defense Class in the first place. It's supposed to be practical, not that you could tell the Toad that." He grabbed her hand and steadied her legs by gently nudging them with his cane, "Look, it's more of a flourish and then a sharp pointing motion, see?" He said as he moved her hand in the way he described, "Now try it again."

The young Ravenclaw swished her wand at the dummy like he'd instructed and a spark flew out of her wand toward the dummy. She glared at the dummy frustrated and was about to complain when Harry nodded to her with an encouraging smile.

"That's it," He said, "Remember, this is going to be one of your most valuable spells," He told the girl seriously, "Get it right now and you'll always have something to fall back on should anything happen."

"What's going to happen to me?" The youngster asked with rolled eyes, "I'm only eleven."

Harry stared at the child his amused features turning cold as though he were watching someone else. The young girl's grin slowly fell and Harry very carefully and with a great deal of effort knelt in front of her so that his face was level with her. A pained smile lifted his lips as he gently placed his hands on her shoulders.

"I wish I could tell you nothing would hurt you just because you're eleven," Harry said quietly, "Maybe you'll never have to see the things I have. But if there's that small chance that someone would ever try to hurt you. Use this spell. Then fight, and don't stop fighting until you're safe. Understand?"

The girl nodded slowly with a troubled look and reached out and touched Harry's cheek tracing the long violent scar that ran down to the bottom of his ear then down his neck.

"Are you safe yet?" She asked.

Harry smiled grimly thinking of what he could tell her without lying, "Tonight I am." He finally said, "And so are you." Harry smiled encouragingly, "Try again. Hit the dummy's wand out of its hand."

"Ok." The girl said facing the Practice Dummy the room had set up for them.

Harry opted to stay kneeling as he waited. She raised her hand and whisked her wand proclaiming the name of the spell with confidence. A pale yellow light left her wand and hit the dummy's hand. The wand in it shot out and flew away from the wooden figure. The girl crowed in excitement and thanked Harry but the boy only smiled a little at her as she showed her friends what she'd done. Ron watched Harry watch the children feeling as though the world outside had sped up and was rushing forward while in this room time stayed still.

The War would come, and the smiling faces of those children would be forever shadowed by troubled hearts. Some of them would lose family, some their lives. Death Eaters didn't care that they were children. They were tools to be used and disposed of. Harry sat fully on the ground with a grunt barking out instructions from the floor for all appearances in control. But for the simple fact that he stayed seated instead of even trying to stand...Ron knew that while he was talking to those kids, he simply didn't have the strength.

The night grew late when Ron, Hermione, and Harry met again in the common room. As was becoming routine they drilled Harry in walking on his own before helping him up the stairs and into bed. Ron sat on his bed and slowly unwound the bandages on his arm that he kept on at all times. He stared at the words without seeing them thinking about what Harry had told the girl earlier that evening. He'd told her she was safe this night but he didn't mention the monster that had invaded the castle and was pushing more and more to gain the control she'd lost when she'd been under investigation for abusing her students.

He knew she wasn't finished. Knew she wouldn't be done until she finished what she'd come to the castle for in the first place. Dolores Umbridge, against all opinion of her, was a patient woman. She was also ambitious and harbored a great deal of hatred for everything that did not exist in her standards.

Ron ran his left hand over his right forearm while watching the even rise and fall of his best friend's chest. Slowly he re-wrapped his arm with cleaner bandage keeping it tight enough to almost be uncomfortable as he pulled the gauze tight temporarily hiding the mark Umbridge had left on him. He stood and got ready for bed nodding at Dean and Seamus as they stumbled in laughing from the common room with a reluctant Neville between them. The night was an unusually quiet one and Ron had little trouble falling to sleep. It was staying asleep that had become the challenge.

And we're back. As you can see, Harry has very little interest in Cho Chang, the reason being everything he'd been through, he just basically grew out of his crush for her. Meaning one less complication for me. A million more to go. Hope you all enjoyed it. Constructive criticism always welcome. Thank you all of you who have commented please keep doing so. It really helps.

Ta for now,

-Red

CHP29